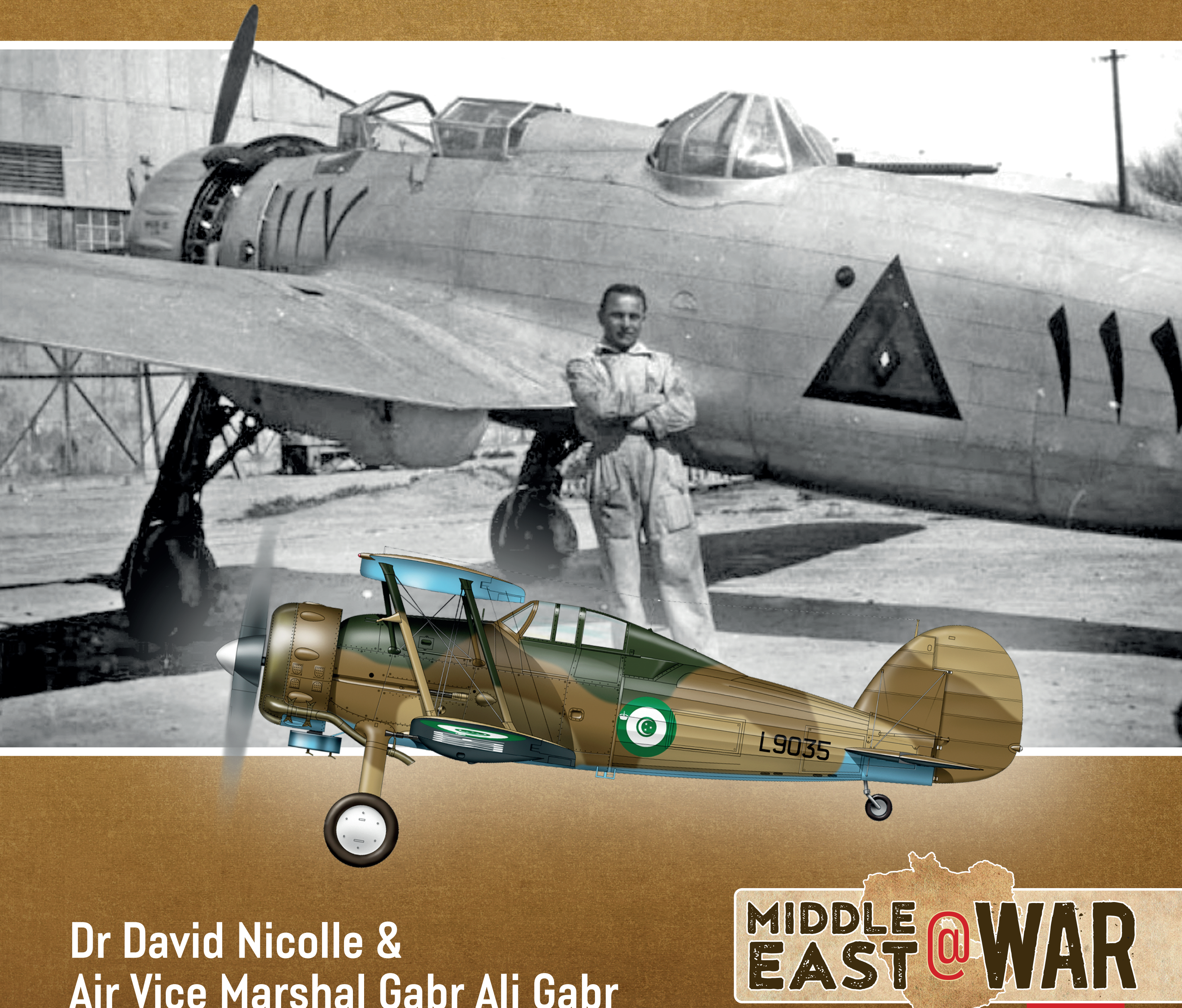
MIDDLE EAST@WAR No.48

AIR POWER AND THE ARAB WORLD 1909-1955

VOLUME 6: THE WORLD CRISIS 1939–MARCH 1941



Dr David Nicolle &
Air Vice Marshal Gabr Ali Gabr

MIDDLE EAST @WAR SERIES

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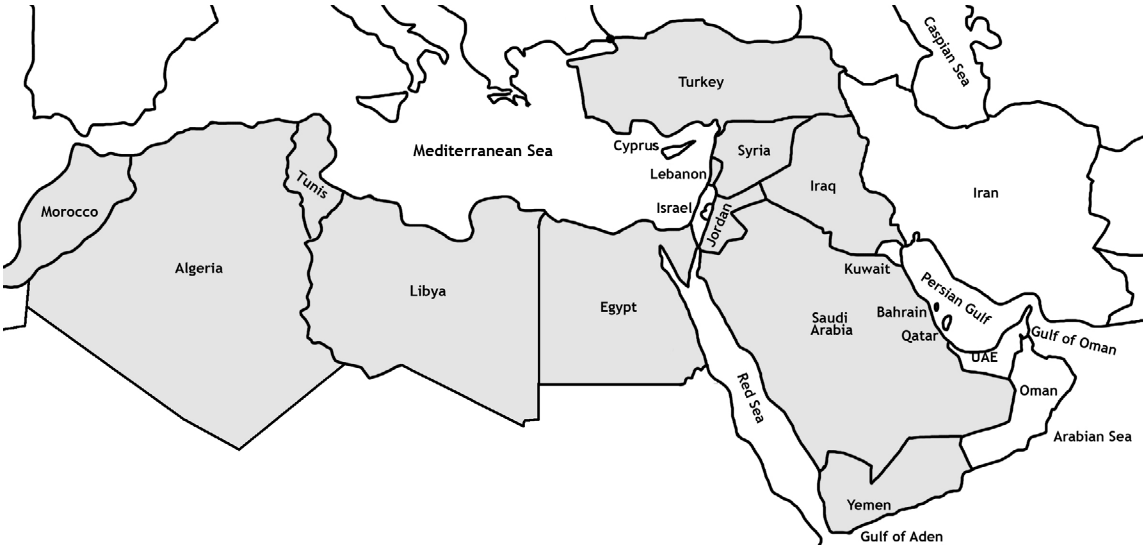

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Email: info@helion.co.uk Website: www.helion.co.uk Twitter: @helionbooks Visit our blog http://blog.helion.co.uk/

Published by Helion & Company 2022
Designed and typeset by Farr out Publications, Wokingham, Berkshire
Cover designed by Paul Hewitt, Battlefield Design (www.battlefield-design.co.uk)

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ISBN 978-1-80451-181-7

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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DEDICATION

For Air Commodore Abd al-Moneim Miqaati (8 July 1904 – 5 April 1982) in memory of a meeting in Groppi's in 1970.

Surely he remains friendless who demands a faultless friend. (Turkish proverb in Shri Ali Yavar Jung, 'Forward' to Z. Ansari (ed.), *Life, Times and Works of Amir Khusrau Dehlavi*, Bombay 1975)

INTRODUCTION

THE ARABS AS BYSTANDERS AND VICTIMS

After hostilities began the Nazis and Fascists continued to proclaim German and Italian support for Arab independence from Britain, France and their respective empires. Mussolini had, of course, earlier announced himself as the Arabs' friend; an unconvincing claim given Italy's recent behaviour in Libya. Amongst the primary targets of Nazi and Fascist propaganda was King Faruq of Egypt and those in Egypt's armed forces who still believed that their King could achieve true independence and dignity. How far such promises and propaganda succeeded remains a matter of intense debate, clouded by competing Middle Eastern nationalisms and by a nostalgia for an imperial past amongst some in Britain and France.

1

ALLIED CONFIDENCE AND ALLIED COLLAPSE

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The outbreak of the Second World War caused little reaction in French-ruled or dominated North Africa, unlike the situation in 1914 when the fellow Muslim Ottoman Empire stood as a possible focus of local resentment against 'infidel' French rule. In fact, there was considerable local enlistment into the French Army, perhaps partially stimulated by memories of shared victory in the First World War. France fell to German invasion before such positive attitudes changed and for the rest of the war the indigenous Muslim Arab and Berber populations of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco remained largely quiescent. It was not until the prospect of an American and Soviet-led Allied victory began to look inevitable that, in the final year of the Second World War, hopes were raised that a post-war world might promise greater independence.

The situation in the French mandated territories of Syria and Lebanon was different. Here, there had been major efforts to negotiate greater independence from France. In Lebanon and to a lesser extent Syria such independence had been more or less promised, though not delivered, by the time the world again plunged into war in September 1939. At the same time, the successes and failures of such efforts tended to reflect political manoeuvring and changes in political power in pre-war France, as well as the fractured nature of society in Lebanon and Syria. The only areas of the Arab world where there was an effective expression of local political demands were Egypt and Iraq which, though nominally independent, were dominated by Britain and its Empire, politically, economically and above all in foreign relations.

While these two populous countries were rarely allowed to behave as if they were independent, Saudi Arabia and Yemen were truly independent. Both adopted a policy of strict neutrality until German and Italian ambitions in the Middle East had been crushed. Even then their governments remained cautious until it became clear who would win. By that time the Soviet Union had changed from being a distant rather than present menace, to being a major player on the world stage. For the peoples of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, all the main combatants were infidel outsiders, while the USSR was even worse because it was an avowedly atheist state with an appalling record of oppressing its Muslim minorities. In contrast, in Italian-ruled Libya, local political aspirations had been so effectively crushed that the majority of the indigenous inhabitants neither opposed nor supported either side during the Second World War. Instead, internal differences and rivalries between the peoples of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica remained strong, as they still do. Meanwhile, the people of the inland province of Fezzen seemed to have lost interest in anything beyond feeding their families and maintaining their cultural integrity.

One area where the Nazis particularly hoped to 'win friends and influence people' was, of course, Palestine. Their albeit limited success with local Arab leaders such as Amin al-Husaini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem from 1922 to 1937, has remained a stick with which to beat the Palestinian Arabs and their aspirations for a state. Even more controversial were the contacts between some extreme, usually self-proclaimed but not necessarily marginal, leaders of Zionism and some members of the Nazi Party or government in Germany.

It might have been expected that the Nazis would lose interest in forcibly transferring German and European Jewish populations to the Middle East following their drawing up a plan in September 1939 to supposedly 'settle' European Jews in an area of Poland. This was, of course, during the Nazis' initial victories and the unexpectedly rapid collapse of French forces between 10 May and 25 June 1940. A few months later, in the autumn of 1940, Avraham Stern, creator of a movement called the Lehi (subsequently known by the British and others in Palestine as 'The Stern Gang' of which Yitzhak Shamir, twice Prime Minister of Israel in the 1980s and early 1990s, was a member) sent a message to a senior German diplomat in Beirut with a bizarre proposal.

To quote the historian Peter Frankopan, this letter stated that common interests could exist between Germany and the 'true national aspirations of the Jewish people' whom Stern claimed to represent. If the Nazi government agreed to recognise these aspirations, Stern offered to 'actively take part in the war on the German side'. Distasteful as this letter now sounds, it demonstrated how deep was loathing of the British mandate in Palestine amongst some in the Zionist settler community. When added to the anticipated 'disloyalty' of many of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and elsewhere, it might explain the near paranoia that gripped some

Zionist militia with an armoured car or personnel carrier in Palestine, apparently photographed before or during the Second World War. (Albert Grandolini collection)

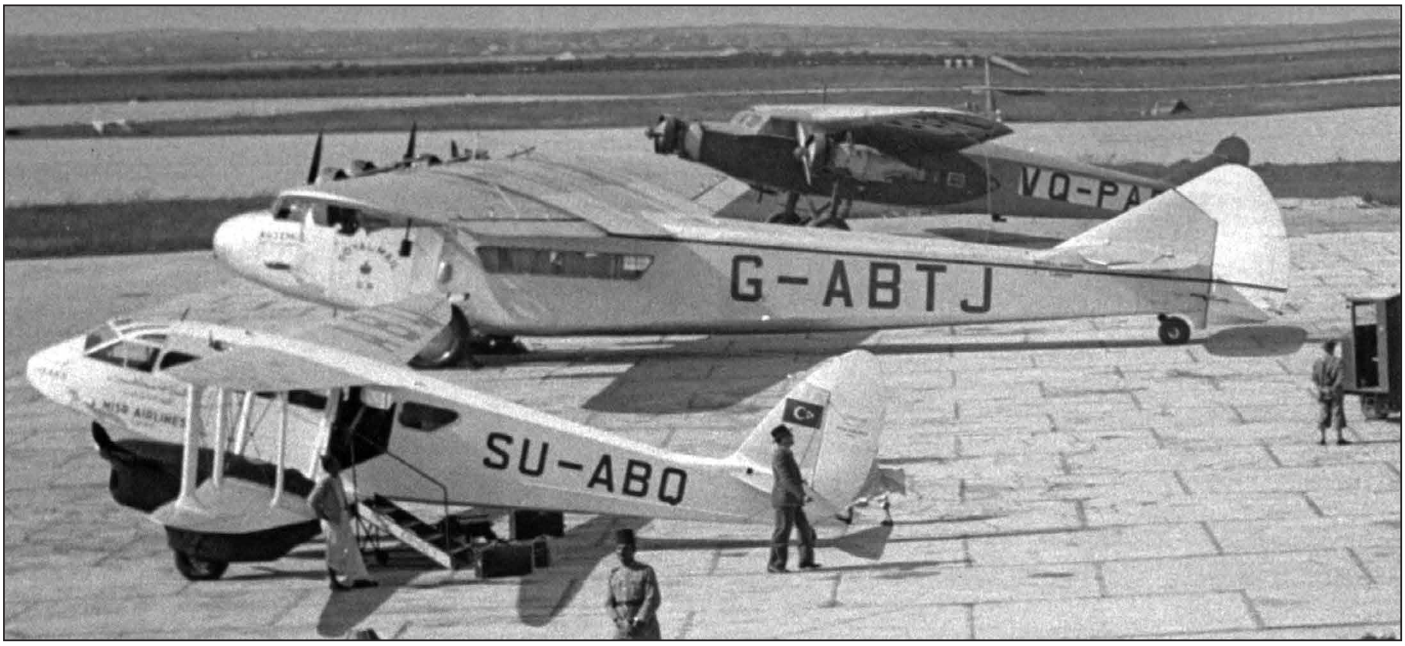
MISR AIRWORK شركة مصر للطيران
SU-ABE

De Havilland DH.80A Puss Moth (SU-ABE) with three DH.60 machines outside the Misr Airwork hanger at Almaza, on the north-eastern edge of Cairo. SU-ABE (c/n 2014) previously had the British registration G-AAXU but was sold to Misr Airwork back in March 1932. The social culture in the Misr Airwork club house is said to have been based on that found at Heston aerodrome west of London. (Egyptian Aero Club)

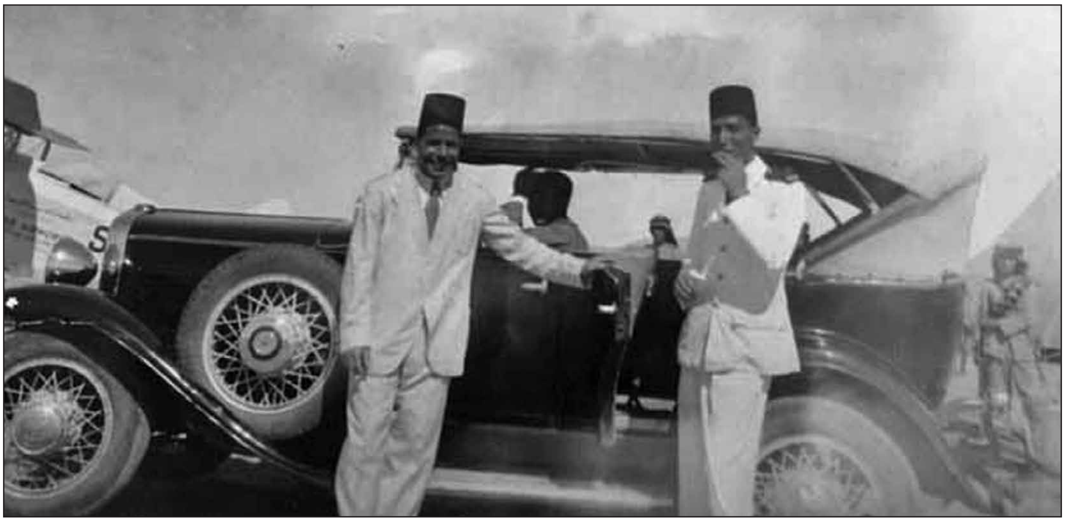
in the British establishment in the Middle East during the Second World War. All Avraham Stern wanted from the Germans, he subsequently explained when criticised by other leaders of the Zionist movement, was to bring Jewish recruits to Palestine. ‘The war against the British to liberate the homeland will begin here,’ he continued. ‘The Jews will attain a state, and the Germans will, incidentally, be rid of an important British base in the Middle East, and also solve the Jewish question in Europe...’ Barely 12 months later, the greater horrors of the Nazi’s ‘Final Solution’ began. What the world now knows is that Hitler did not care where the Jews went, so long as they disappeared, and as the course of the war meant that Germany was not in a position to deport millions of people to another part of the world, the Nazis decided instead upon industrial scale slaughter.

When placed beside the greatest crime ever committed by a modern European state, the ruthless British reaction to a tribal uprising in the Aden Protectorate in 1940 seems trivial – except to those on the receiving end of the bombs dropped by the RAF. It happened because a three-year truce expired in the Hadramawt region where the authority of the local Kathiri Sultan was weak. It also happened as the German Army broke through Anglo-French defences in Belgium and France. There were only a few British aeroplanes available but the North African campaign had yet to start, and these machines could obviously not contribute to the defence of France, so a hurried and only partly successful response to the unrest was mounted.

During the so-called ‘Phoney War’ in Europe, the British had faced an albeit small-scale local uprising in what was then the British-ruled Aden Protectorate. As a result, Vickers Vincent biplane

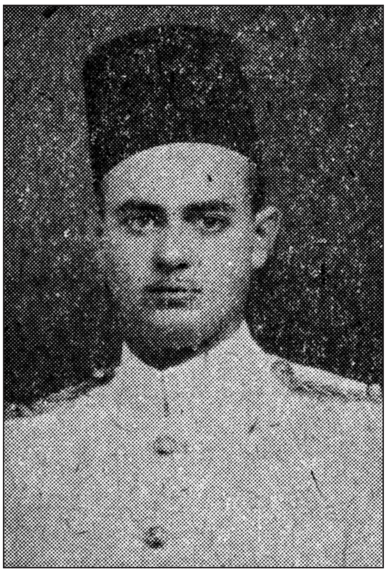


A de Havilland DH.89 Dragon Rapide (SU-ABS) of Misr Airways refuelling at Lydda in Palestine during the final years of peace. Also on the apron are a British Armstrong Whitworth AW.15 Atlanta (G-ABTJ, named *Artemis*) of Imperial Airways and the Palestinian registered Fokker F.XVIII (VQ-PAF) which shortly afterwards crashed at Lydda on 13 January 1939. (Fleetway archive)



Ahmad Isma'il on the right wearing the white uniform and red fez of Misr Air, his country's first airline, with an unnamed colleague in an Arab country, probably Saudi Arabia. Partially visible in the background is one of Misr Air's de Havilland DH.83 Fox Moths (either SU-ABA or ABG). (Ahmad Ismail photograph)

bombers of the RAF attacked a 'rebel' stronghold at al-Ghurfa, causing the dissident leader Ibn Abdat to surrender, which was fortunate as an assembly of local pro-British tribal forces made it clear that they were unwilling to assault al-Ghurfa directly. A few weeks later, Italy entered the war and the RAF had to look to the defence of both Aden and British Somaliland on the other side of the Gulf of Aden. The latter fell to the Italian Army and this, along with the British Empire's troubles elsewhere, encouraged Ibn Abdat to continue his defiance of the British throughout the Second World War.



Muhammad Adli Kafafi in his summer dress uniform as a student at the Egyptian Military College shortly before the Second World War. (Kafafi family archive)

For the British and the RAF, Ibn Abdat remained an annoyance and an embarrassment but never a real threat. Nor could the slightly strained position of the RAF in and around Aden alter the basic strategic situation across the Middle East. This boiled down to the fact that the RAF enjoyed a number of clear advantages in the air war from 1940 to 1943. With years of experience operating in that part of the world, and with an established network of air bases and smaller airfields as well as largely dependable supply lines, the RAF was undoubtedly the 'established power'. In fact, the aviation magazine *Flight* outlined Britain's advantages in an article published in 1941, following the Axis conquest of Greece:

> Britain's airbases in the Middle East are not only supported by locally available fuel, labour and material resources: sea and air routes stretching outside the immediate combat area link them with important production centres of the Empire and the USA. The position of the Axis is entirely different. The favourable geographical distribution of the Axis bases in the Middle East is

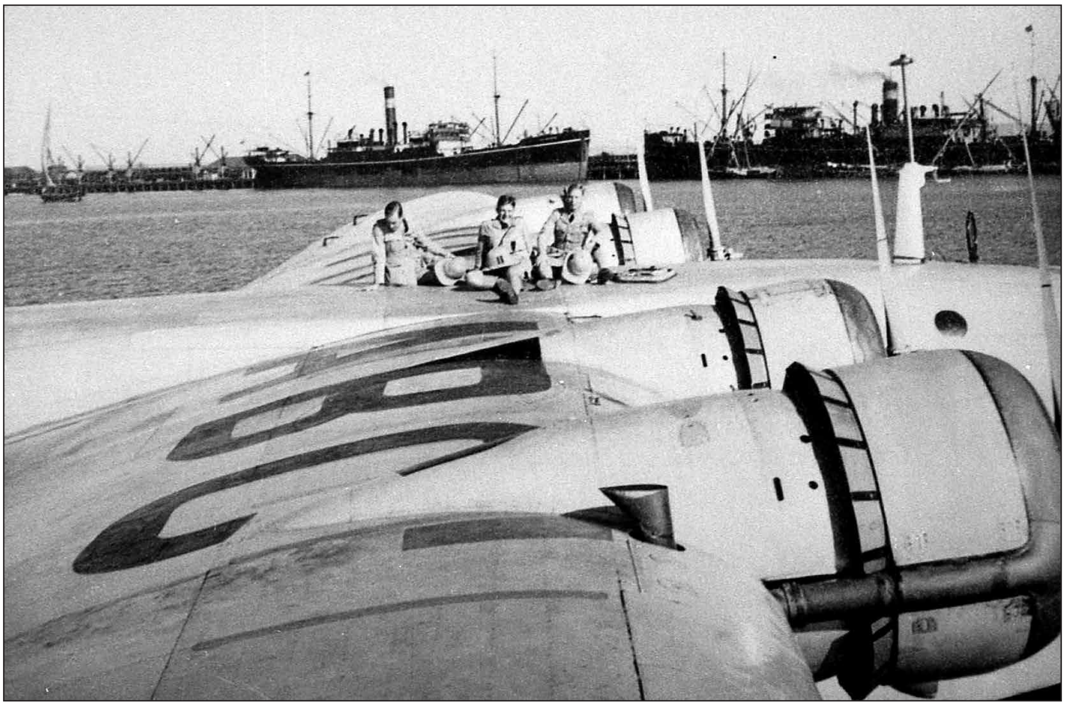
> heavily outweighed by their inferior supply position. These bases have not the advantages of a hinterland of substantial supply potentialities nor of secure supply lines. To a great extent they are dependent on either the existing stocks or the maintenance of communications with the Italian and Greek mainland.

Here it should be recognised that it was the job of such publications to boost wartime morale by highlighting the might and resources of the British Empire. In fact, the author's father Patrick Nicolle spent the first year of the war illustrating magazine articles which conclusively showed that Britain and France were so superior to Germany that the war would be won quite quickly. Then France fell and 'artist-contributor' Pat Nicolle was drafted in the British Army to be trained in gas warfare (fortunately poison gas was not used in the Second World War, or this book would probably not have been written as its author would not have been conceived!)

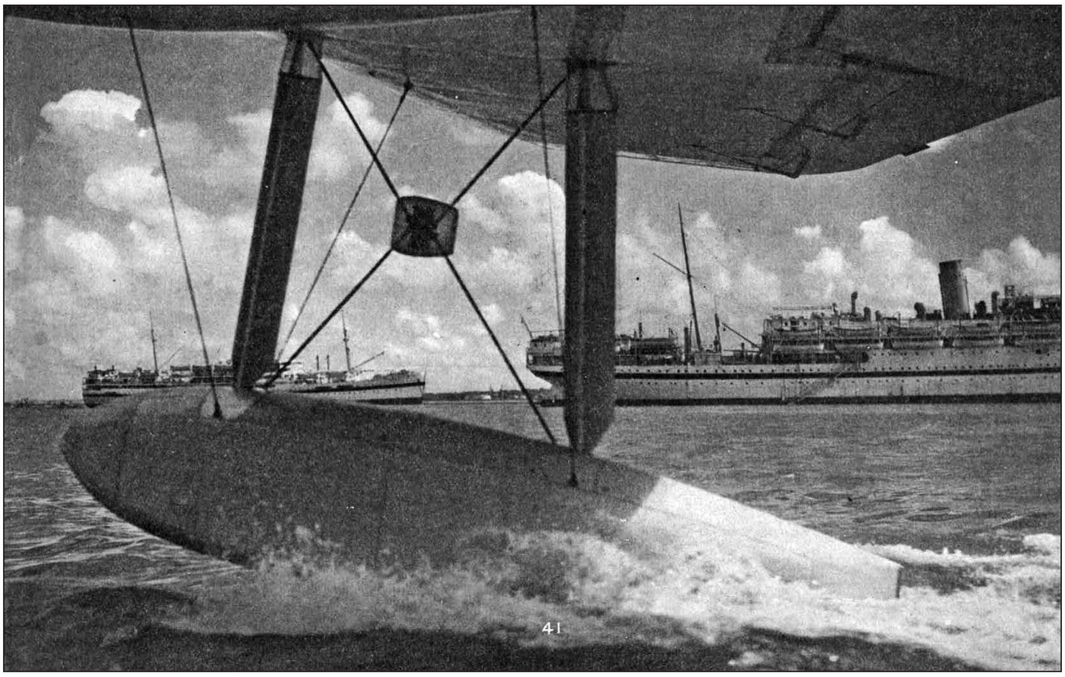
In reality, the entry of Italy into the Second World War as Germany's ally on 10 June 1940 weakened but did not destroy Britain's strategic advantages. Until Italian East Africa (Eritrea, Somalia and Abyssinia) was conquered, Italian aeroplanes and naval vessels threatened British maritime supply routes in the Red Sea between the Indian Ocean and at the southern entrance to the Suez Canal. At the same time, the RAF in the Sudan, southern Egypt, Uganda and Kenya was not yet in a position to seriously interrupt air links between Italian Libya and Italian East Africa. The threat of an Italian ground offensive to link these two parts of Italy's African Empire was still taken seriously in both London and Cairo. In this situation, the British felt it necessary to make greater use of supply lines through the Persian Gulf and Iraq – themselves squeezed between a Syria now governed by representatives of the neutral but sometimes ominously anti-British Vichy government in a partially German-occupied France, and three large neutral states. These were Persia/Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, whose attitudes might become hostile if Britain looked likely to lose.

EGYPT

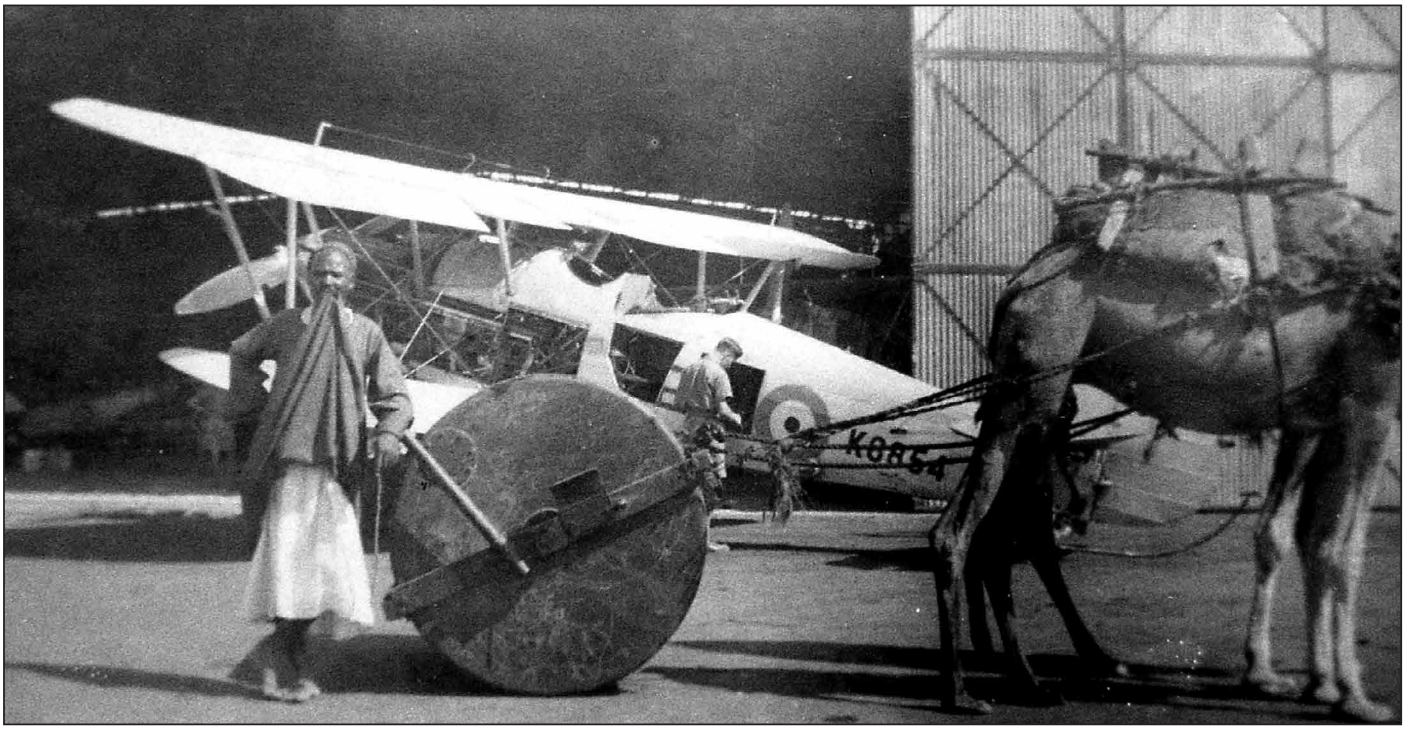
The situation in Egypt at the start of the Second World War was complex, though the country was culturally almost homogeneous when compared to fractured Iraq and Syria. Even the differences between the large Muslim majority, the Christian minority and the smaller Jewish minority tended to be a matter of family identity and were not normally manifested politically. The Egyptian population was nevertheless riven by huge socio-economic differences as well as competing political affiliations. For Britain, the most worrying political groups were small: namely the communists on the left and the ultra-nationalist, deeply conservative and fascistic *Misr al-Fatat* or Young Egypt movement on the right. The latter had failed to make inroads into the Egyptian political system. Indeed,



Three RAF officers on top of the fuselage of a Short Empire flying boat (Australian registration VH-ABC) of Qantas Empire Airways. They are said to include some of the Wellesley aircrew who broke the World Long Distance Record by flying non-stop from Egypt to Australia in 1938. (John Woodroffe)



A British Imperial Airways Short S.23 Empire flying boat taking off, with two British troopships in background. The photograph was probably taken in Egypt or India. (Fleetway archive)



A Hawker Hind (K8854), possibly of the RAF's No. 21 Squadron at Hilwan south of Cairo around the time of the outbreak of the Second World War. Like other British air units in Egypt at this time, those at Hilwan relied heavily upon Egyptian unskilled and semi-skilled labour, and to a lesser extent also on Egyptian skilled men. (Woodroffe family archive)

it would feel a need to reinvent itself as the Islamic Nationalist Party. The party's motto was 'God, Nation, King', and its emblem included the three Pyramids of Giza. In addition to being fiercely nationalist, emphasising Egypt's Arab and Islamic identity and opposing any foreign interference in Egyptian affairs, *Misr al-Fatat* had long advocated the development of powerful armed forces. For these reasons it had significant and passionate support amongst a minority of Egyptian officers. At the other extreme was the Egyptian Communist Party which grew in strength during the Second World War, though largely confined to Egypt's small class of industrial workers. The Communist Party also found limited support in the Egyptian armed forces late in the war when the prestige of the Soviet Army was rising.

Until the Egyptian government declared war on the Axis powers as the Second World War was drawing to a close, it maintained a policy of theoretical neutrality. The British were so worried about the impact of Axis propaganda that they demanded martial law be imposed in November 1939, followed by the imposition of press censorship on 1 December. A 'state of siege' was also declared in December 1939, well before Italy entered the conflict. Thereafter, Egypt accepted British advice and remained neutral while continuing to provide more assistance to the Allied cause than had been demanded under the 1936 Treaty.

On the other hand, the tones adopted in official documents could vary. For example, the following letter (originally in Arabic) from the Commanding Officer of the REAF to the Egyptian Minister and Undersecretary of Defence on 25 November 1939 sounds almost complacent:

> Your Excellency the Minister of National Defence
> Your Excellency the Undersecretary of National Defence
> 25 November 1939
>
> Since there is a desire to determine the nature of the Royal Egyptian Air Force and the extent of its material and morale, I will explain it to your Excellency as follows, stating the characteristics of each aircraft and its readiness for fighting.
>
> The Royal Egyptian Air Force fleets are in three sections:
>
> 1. First Support Squadrons
> 2. Fighting Squadrons
> 3. Light bombs Squadrons
>
> First – *First Support Squadrons*
>
> The aircraft of these squadrons are 18 Lysander aircraft, of which two are undergoing repairs. These squadrons provide support to the Army in addition to carrying out reconnaissance operations of all kinds.
>
> *Aircraft load* – Personnel – Each aircraft carries a pilot, a gunner or a radio operator.
>
> Weapons – Each aircraft is armed with the following weapons
> A) 1 forward Browning machine gun (1150 rounds per minute)
> B) 1 Lewis rear cannon (actually a machine gun) with eight drums each with 86 rounds (700 rounds per minute)
> In addition, each aircraft carries one of the four following bomb groups:
>
> 1. 4 high explosive bombs each weighing 120 pounds with 8 other high explosive bombs each weighing 20 pounds.
> 2. 2 bombs of the same style as group (1) each weighing 250 pounds, with 8 bombs of the same style as group (1).
>
> Or
>
> 3. 16 bombs of the same style as group (1) each weighing 20 pounds.
>
> Or
>
> 4. 16 incendiary bombs each weighing 25 pounds.
>
> Second – *Fighter Squadrons*
>
> There are 36 Gladiator aeroplanes in these squadrons, one of which is undergoing repairs. These squadrons are divided into two units:
>
> 1. Second Squadron
> 2. Fifth Squadron.
>
> *Aircraft Load* – Personnel – each aeroplane carries the pilot.

Equipment – each aeroplane is equipped with a radio and flight oxygen apparatus for high altitude aviation.

Armament – each aeroplane is armed with 4 forward Browning machine guns (1150 rounds per minute).

Third – *Light Bomber Squadron*

There are 15 Audax aeroplanes in these squadrons.

Aircraft Load – Personnel – each aeroplane carries the pilot and a gunner or a radio operator.

Equipment – each aeroplane is equipped with a radio and a camera.

Armament – each aeroplane is armed with a forward machine gun Vickers (700 rounds per minute) – a rear machine gun Vickers (k) (1150 rounds per minute)

Bombs – A) two high explosive bombs each weighing 120 pounds in addition to 4 other high explosive bombs each weighing 20 pounds.

Or

4 boxes of incendiary bombs, each carrying 40 bombs each weighing 1/3 pound.

B) 8 high explosive bombs each weighing 20 pounds.

I would like to assert to your Excellency while I am highlighting these light bomber squadrons that their pilots are fully experienced and knowledgeable, thus enabling them to meet the nation's call when defending it, if the hour of danger comes – knowing that these squadrons have already been sent to their war stations in their fields dedicated to the defence of Egypt since the very first moment of the war. Moreover, they joined in operations with the British Air Force in the Canal and Suez area, and performed their duties to your satisfaction, prompting the British High Command to appreciate this cooperation and praise it. These squadrons continue to work with squadrons from our allies until now. And necessary arrangements have been made for the REAF to join the exercises that will be conducted by the British RAF in Alexandria on 13th December.

This, your Excellency, is what I wanted to highlight to you so you can have an idea of the material and moral strength of the REAF, which indicates clearly the advanced stage that they have reached. And I hope they continue to advance forward to become equal if not better than any other.

Yours sincerely
Air Force Commander
Director of the Royal Air Force

Above all, Egypt functioned as a secure base for Allied operations. On the other hand, the high-handed attitude of the British government, embassy and armed forces soon caused resentment, just as it had during the First World War (see Volume Two). This was particularly felt amongst the educated urban middle class, aristocratic elite and above all in Egyptian palace circles. To many it seemed that the British and their imperial allies had learned nothing since the previous conflict and were 'reverting to type' by assuming that they could do whatever they wanted and behaving as badly as they had before. This time, however, the 'politically aware' in Egypt, its government and its armed forces were less willing to submit to British arrogance.

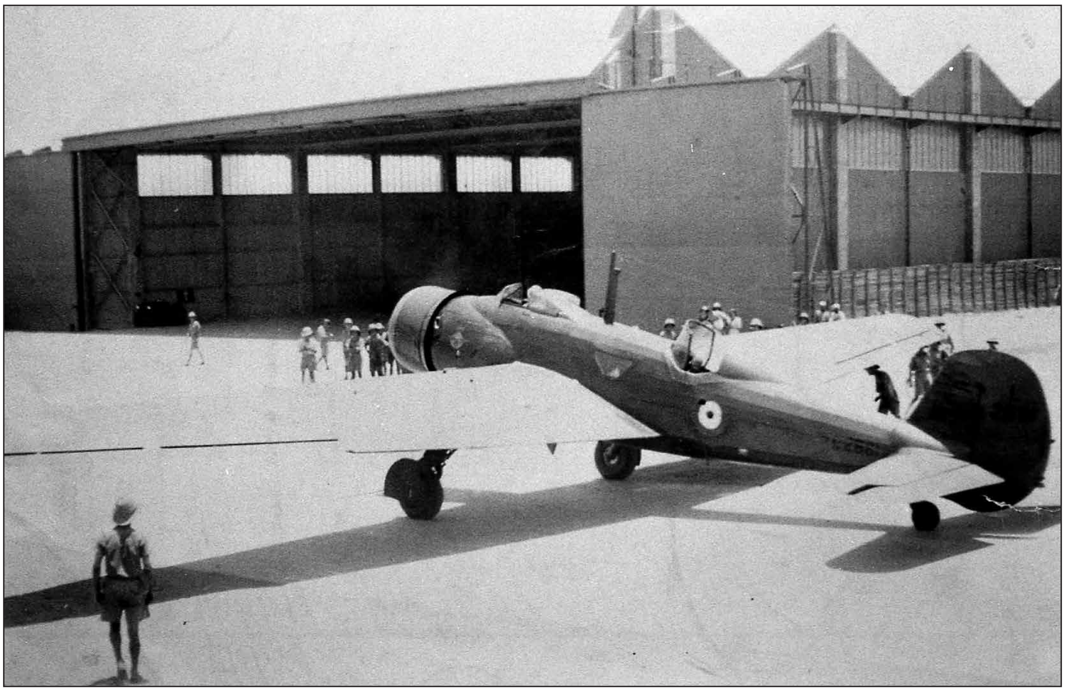
For the British, of course, such behaviour was justified, especially after the fall of France when Britain 'stood alone' with 'its back against the wall'. Britain had more pressing and immediate priorities than Egyptian national sensibilities – a fact only occasionally recognised by educated Egyptians whose nationalism during the war years has been described as the prickly variety normal amongst proud peoples emerging from decades of humiliation at the hands of powerful foreigners. Indeed, many in the Egyptian political and military elites felt that Britain was treating their country like a troublesome child – and deeply resented that fact. In 1940, one outside political commentator wrote that the people of Cairo were upset when the British War Office assumed that it could 'talk to Egypt like a schoolmaster' and predicted that such behaviour would backfire.

After Italy invaded southern France in June 1940, the Second World War came to Egyptian territory in the form of the North African campaign. During this prolonged struggle, in which military fortunes swung back and forth several times, there was considerable sympathy for the Germans in some sections of Egyptian society, although feelings about Italy were less positive. Some in Egypt naively believed that, in the event of an Axis victory, Germany would respect and support Egyptian independence. Such a belief appears to have taken root in parts of what might be called 'the Palace establishment', amongst an Egyptian Royal family and an aristocracy which traced its roots back to the Ottoman Empire which had fought the First World War as an ally of Germany. Not surprisingly, given their almost total ignorance of the reality of Nazi rule and ideology, some of those who clung to a nostalgic view of Egyptian-German relations were fixated upon one thing, and that was getting rid of the British.

As a result, even those in various Egyptian governments who had a clearer idea of what the Second World War was all about, found it difficult to actively support the British – or at least to do so openly. Much the same division of opinion was found within the Egyptian Army and the REAF. The result was years of official non-belligerence in a war that raged across much of Egypt's territory, and even more of its airspace. Some in the British political and military leaderships encouraged such a policy, realising that to ask for more risked disturbances or perhaps outright revolution. Even so the British were generally suspicious of the government of Ali Mahir Pasha (Prime Minister from 18 August 1939 to 28 June 1940) who favoured limited support for Britain. Other Egyptians took a simpler view and wanted Egypt to commit itself and its very weak armed forces to the Allied cause, especially in the dark years of 1940–1941. One of these was the explorer Ahmad Hasanain, who was said to favour Egyptian participation in the war against Italy and Germany. He would subsequently join King Faruq's inner circle as Chef du Cabinet in August 1941, though the British may have been disappointed by Hasanain's declared policy which was to 'keep [Egypt] outside the horrors of war'.

King Faruq apparently maintained some sort of tenuous contacts with the Nazi government through his father-in-law, Yussuf Zulficar Pasha, the first Egyptian ambassador in Persia/Iran (1939 to 1942). At one point it may even have been suggested that King Faruq flee from Egypt to seek refuge and support in an area under German control or strong German influence. Some in the British Embassy in Cairo certainly feared that the presence of many Italians in the king's household made the work of Axis propaganda easier. It was also as a result of British demands that General Aziz al-Masri was removed from his position as Chief of the Egyptian General Staff.

Despite the terms of the Anglo–Egyptian Treaty, the Second World War saw an effective British reoccupation of Egypt. The outbreak of the conflict had already highlighted the limitations, from Egypt's point of view, of the 1936 Anglo–Egyptian Treaty. These became more obvious after Italy declared war. In practice, the British did what they liked, or at least appeared to do so in the eyes of most Egyptians. Worse still, Winston Churchill made it abundantly



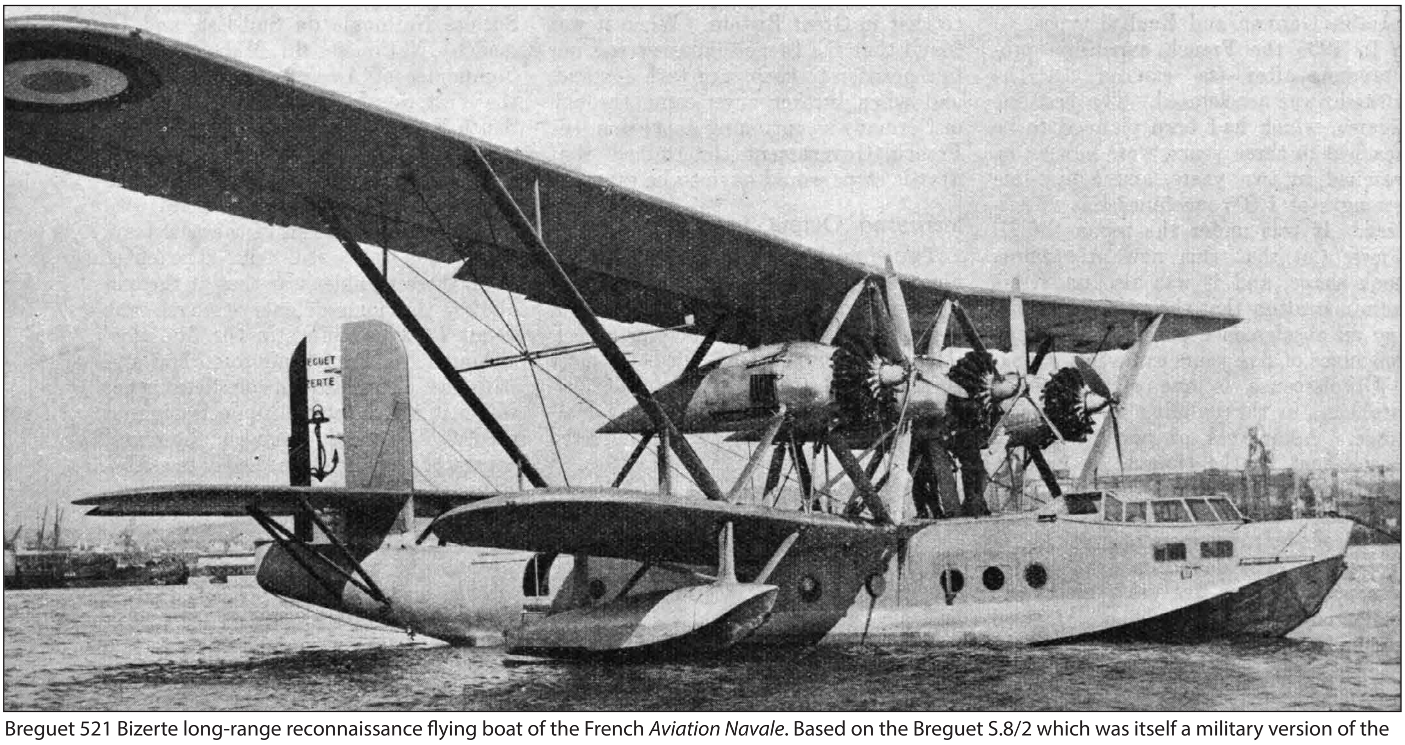
One of three RAF Vickers Wellesley long-range bombers which, under the command of Squadron Leader R. Kellett, broke the World Long Distance Record by flying non-stop from Egypt to Australia in 1938. Here the machine is being serviced at Ismailiya, close to the Suez Canal, where the epic journey started. One Wellesley failed to complete the trip but the other two reached Darwin in northern Australia on 5 November at Darwin. (John Woodroffe photograph)

clear that he did not regard Egypt as a truly independent nation and that he did not trust Egyptians in uniform. More discretely, the British Foreign Office wrote on 15 December 1939:

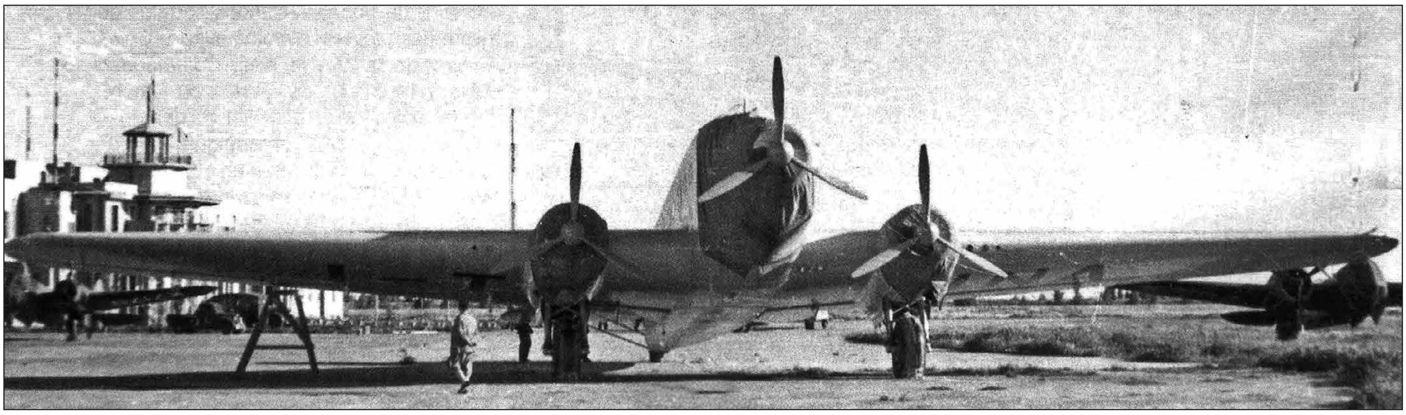
> It is no real interest of ours that the Egyptian Army should reach the maximum of efficiency in training and equipment. The danger of a hostile government or an Arabi Pasha revolt is always latent – We should lose no sleep over inefficiency in Egyptian high places or the deterioration of army material through bad officership. So long as we can place the blame on the shoulders of the Egyptians, these deficiencies are in a long view, no loss to us.

Paradoxically, the outbreak of war with Italy in 1940 was received enthusiastically by most Egyptian officers, many of whom wanted to invade Libya and to punish the Italians for their brutal crushing of Libyan resistance. This was completely impractical in military terms, but it did serve as a counterbalance to a widespread unwillingness in the Egyptian Army and REAF to serve as 'tools' of the British. Within Egypt, the behaviour of British and Imperial troops got worse as the war progressed, with soldiers often singing obscene parodies of the Egyptian National Anthem in public. Few Egyptians dared strike back or even to protest, but one of the few exceptions was Colonel Muhammad Naguib – later the titular leader of the 1952 Revolution – who once threw an offensive British soldier off a Cairo bus.

Despite such behaviour, there was no wish for a German victory, outside a small circle of extremists which for a time included Anwar Sadat. Another young officer, Gamal Abd al-Nasser, was more typical in advocating cooperation with Britain in the hope of obtaining a better bargaining position once the war was over. For most of the Egyptian Army it was simply a case of 'better the devil you know'. Prime Minister Ali Mahir had been forced from office on 28 June 1940, to be succeeded by Hassan Sabri Pasha, the former Minister of War, but he was assassinated in Parliament on 14 November and was



Breguet 521 Bizerte long-range reconnaissance flying boat of the French *Aviation Navale*. Based on the Breguet S.8/2 which was itself a military version of the British Short S.8 Calcutta flying boat, the Breguet 521 Bizerte was an old design by 1939, having first flown six years earlier, but was still in production. One unit of these machines was based at Binzart (Bizerte-La Karouba) in Tunisia. (Fleetway archive)



As the war clouds gathered, the Italian airline Ala Littoria was conducting high altitude and very long-range tests, supposedly to assess the viability of such operations for passenger transport. Here a Savoia Marchetti SM.75C (no. 32018, registration I-TINA) of Ala Littoria was photographed in Cairo during a flight to or from Iraq, with RAF Blenheim bombers in the background. During the Second World War this aeroplane was transferred to *No. 601 Squadriglia* of the *Reggia Aeronautica* where it was given the military code 601-1. (Ugo Cheloni via Apostolo & Garello)

succeeded as Egyptian Prime Minister by the supposedly more pro-British Husain Sirry Pasha who would remain in office until 4 February 1942, steering his country through a tumultuous period.

IRAQ

The story of Iraq's role in the Second World War was very different from that of Egypt. Although both countries contained elements who genuinely hoped for an Axis victory, believing it would bring their country freedom from British domination, such groups were stronger and more active in Iraq. They were also present in larger numbers in the Iraqi armed forces than in the Egyptian, were prepared to act decisively and believed that the British military position in Iraq was significantly weaker than in Egypt. The result was what the British called the Rashid Ali Rebellion which gave the British a serious scare, especially as it was feared something similar could happen in Egypt.

German Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring (in a white uniform) inspecting a unit of Italian Savoia-Marchetti SM.81 Pipistrello bombers during his visit to Libya in 1939, with Italo Balbo, the Governor-General of Italian-ruled Libya, standing by his side. (Albert Grandolini collection)

In several other respects, the situation in Iraq was very different from that in Egypt. The country did not share a frontier with an Axis power, as Egypt did with both Italian Libya and, in the form of the Anglo–Egyptian Sudan, with Italian East Africa. On the other hand, after the fall of France in 1940, Iraq shared a frontier with Syria which was now under the authority of an administration loyal to the new Vichy government of France. As far as the British RAF was concerned, Iraq, Egypt and the intervening territories of Transjordan and Palestine, formed part of the same overall administrative and defensive structure. Thus, men on loan to or seconded to the Royal Egyptian Air Force and the Royal Iraqi Air Force were dealt with under the same heading. Similarly, the outbreak of hostilities in the Mediterranean in June 1940 was rapidly followed by the RAF moving its main overseas flying-training base, No. 4 Service Flying Training School (SFTS), from Abu Suwayr in Egypt to Dhibban (Habbaniya) in Iraq.

Even before these events, one of the least known military plans of the Second World War had already been drawn up. It emerged in the aftermath of the conquest of Poland and its division between the two invading powers, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, but before the German invasion of France. In both London and Paris there was serious concern that the Nazis might encourage the Soviet Union to intervene in, or maybe even to invade, Persia (Iran). Consequently, the French Chief of the General Staff, General Claude

Gamelin, ordered that a variety of contingency plans be drawn up, several of which reflected events during the First World War. For example, one plan envisaged the establishment of a strong military base area which could threaten Germany from the rear, preferably in the Balkans. Indeed, this idea was taken so seriously that it was endorsed by the French Prime Minister. It then fell out of favour, replaced by the idea of a Franco-British invasion of the neutral countries of Scandinavia in order to take control of strategically vital sources of Swedish iron ore. This would have been done by violating Norway's territorial neutrality or at least its territorial waters – and was enthusiastically supported by Winston Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty. For him, crippling Germany's supply chain remained central to all such discussions.

A similarly cavalier attitude towards the integrity of neutral counties was central to another plan drawn up the British and French during the first months of the Second World War. This related to Persia and envisaged British and French forces using their respective military and air bases in Iraq and Syria to launch an assault upon Soviet oil fields in what is now the independent state of Azerbaijan, through Persia. Where Iraq was concerned, such a plan also envisaged a role – albeit a defensive one – for the Iraqi Air Force.

2

IRAQ AS A BASE AREA

In 1939 Iraq, like Egypt, found itself involved in a war that was not of its choosing. Although both countries were monarchies, the government of Iraq, unlike that of Egypt, was currently dominated by military men, despite being headed by the veteran politician Nuri al-Sa'id whose second term of office ran from 25 December 1938 to 31 March 1940. These senior officers were known as the 'Circle of Seven' and consisted of Sunni Muslim Arab Nationalists. The most powerful were called the 'Golden Square'; being Colonel Salah al-Din Ali al-Sabbagh, Colonel Kamil Shabib, Colonel Fahmi Sa'id and Colonel Mahmud Salman al-Janabi, the Commanding Officer of the RIrqAF. Meanwhile the child-king of Iraqi, Faisal II, was a mere figurehead, royal authority being in the hands of his uncle, Prince Abd al-Ilah, as Regent. It was he who had to negotiate with, and try to curtail the excesses of, the Circle of Seven and the Golden Square.

Also like Egypt, the Kingdom of Iraq avoided declaring war on Germany at the start of the conflict and was initially reluctant to break off diplomatic links, despite British pressure to do so. Nevertheless, after a short delay, Nuri al-Sa'id's government cut diplomatic relations with Germany. Dr Grobba, the German Ambassador, and his staff left the country on 5 September 1939 and other German nationals were transported to India for internment. Less than a fortnight after the outbreak of the Second World War, the Iraqi authorities declared a state of emergency, introduced rationing and imposed curfews, effectively placing the country on a war footing.

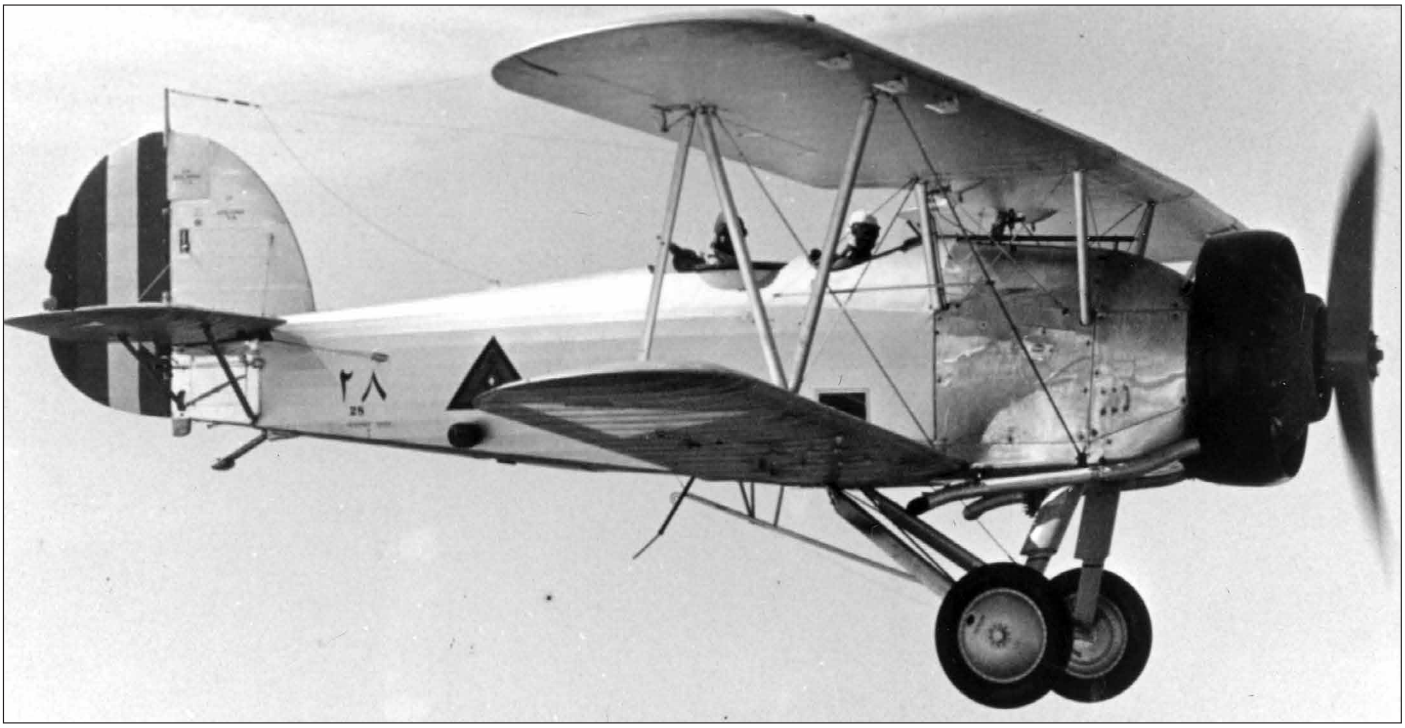
Relations with Germany's as yet non-belligerent ally Italy remained unchanged and, not surprisingly, the Iraqi capital of Baghdad continued to be regarded by the British as 'a nest of enemy spies'. Iraq also played host to the exiled Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and several of his leading supporters whom London again saw as 'anti-British'. There was certainly plenty of intrigue, and even some violence, but Britain had no alternative but to run down its own military presence in Iraq because these forces were urgently needed elsewhere. At times it seemed as if the only powerful friends the British had in Iraq were Nuri al-Sa'id and the Regent, Prince Abd al-Ilah. After breaking off relations with Germany, the Iraqi Prime Minister allowed the RAF to carry on using the vital staging-posts of Habbaniya and Shaibah without interference – at least for a while. Both of these aerodromes were soon also home to RAF flying schools.

Al-Aqid al-Rakan Salah al-Din Ali al-Sabbagh was appointed Director of the RIrAF four days after the assassination of General Bakr Sidqi and al-Sabbagh's predecessor, *Qa'id al-Tayar* Muhamad Ali Jawad, on 11 August 1937. He seems to have been a temporary leader, chosen at a moment of crisis, and only retained this position until 11 October 1937. (Iraqi Air Force archive)

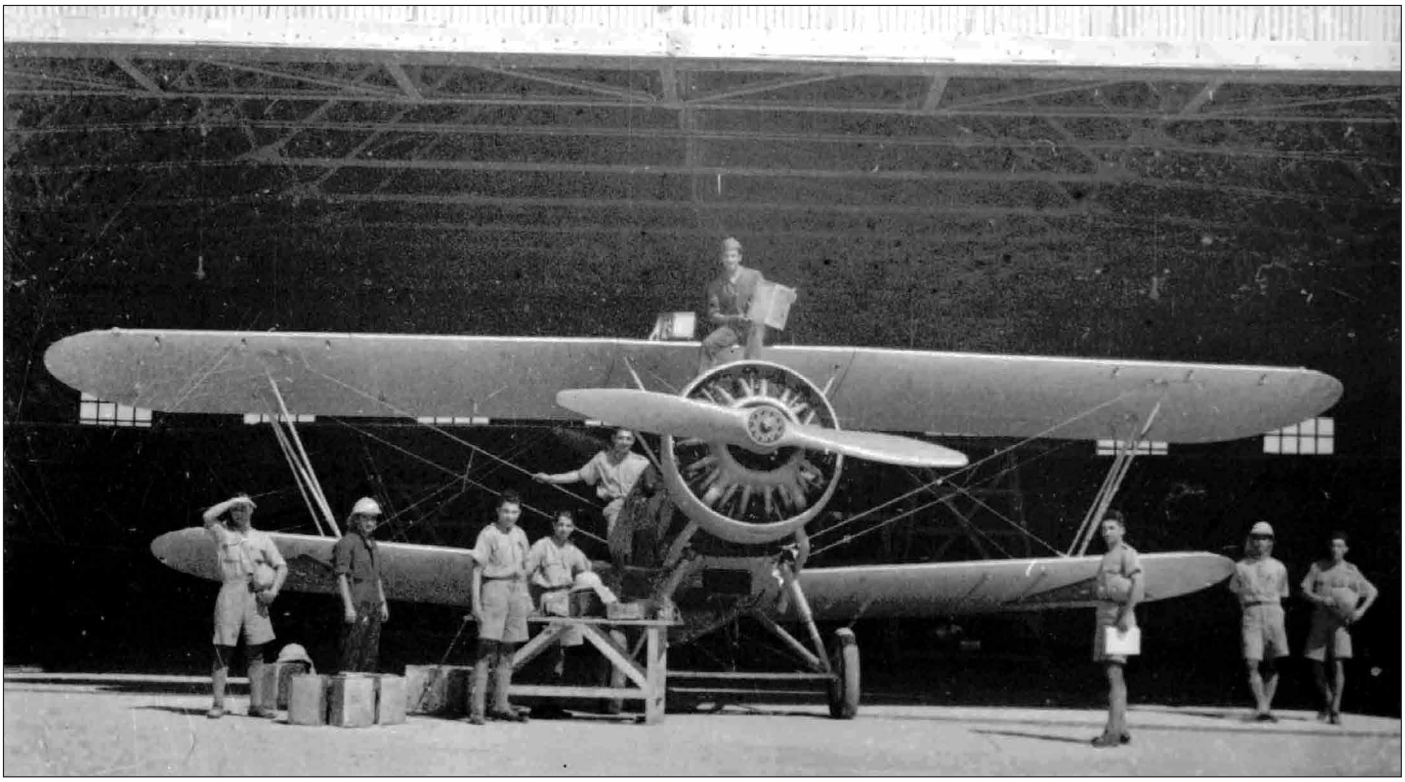
Meanwhile, the most significant events in the RIrqAF were further deliveries of Italian aeroplanes. In other respects, Colonel Mahmud Salman al-Janabi remained as head of the Air Force as well as being a member of the "Golden Square". The only significant change in the command structure of the RIrqAF seems to have involved No. 4 Squadron, where Major Abd al-Jalil Husain took over; remaining in charge until 1941.

The Royal Iraqi Air Force was already deeply political – clearly more so that the Royal Egyptian Air Force. Muna Tawfiq recalled how her father Hassan Tawfiq had studied alongside several Iraqi officers at the RAF's elite Cranwell College in 1938–39 and remained in contact with them for many years; one in particular being named Yahya Ithniyani. This was yet another example of how the Arab Air Forces of the Middle East were, in their way, quite a small world. At the same time resentment of British domination meant that people sometimes avoided passing on information to the British who therefore did not always know what was going on. For example, one of the RIrqAF's more experienced officers, Ra'is Rashad, was seconded to the Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority in 1939 though the British do not seem to have become aware of this until the spring of 1945.

Despite – or perhaps even because of – British reservations, the RIrqAF was enthusiastic about its powerful new Italian aeroplanes. Nevertheless, the Breda Ba.65 was a difficult machine to fly and No. 5 Squadron lost a number in accidents, though as yet without fatalities. As a result, training was briefly put on hold. Believing that its influence in the RIrqAF was threatened by the potent new Italian aeroplanes, and fearing that Iraq might even turn towards Germany, Britain decided that it had to offer the Iraqis something. Given the overriding demands of the RAF, the only aeroplanes which seemed



Hawker Iraqi Audax number 28 of the RIrAF's No. 1 (Army Coop.) Squadron in flight. No. 1 Squadron would still be flying these obsolete aircraft when Iraq went to war with the British Empire in May 1941. (Albert Grandolini collection)



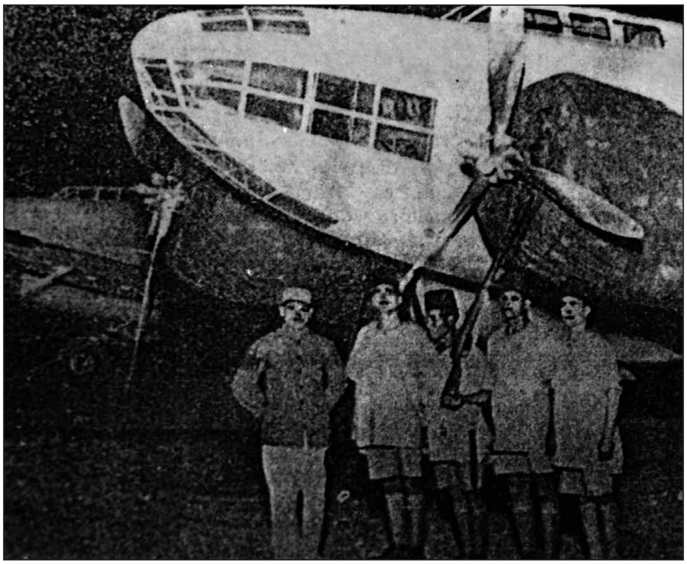
Another Hawker Nisr Audax of No. 1 (Army Coop.) Squadron of the Royal Iraqi Air Force in front of a hanger, probably at Mu'askar al-Firnas aerodrome outside Mosul. (Iraqi Air Force)

to be available were the large, unwieldy and far from modern Vickers Vincent three-seat light bombers. The Vincent was, in fact, a modified version of the Vildebeest torpedo bomber with torpedo equipment removed and an auxiliary fuel tank added along with a message-pick-up hook and new signalling gear. Six were sold to Iraq, reportedly for a nominal price of 200 Iraqi *dinars* each, though only five actually entered RIrqAF service (serial numbers 120 to 124). They arrived in Iraq on 2 November 1939 and were formed into an Independent Vincent Flight at Hinaidi Aerodrome.

Selected pilots started training immediately and, as soon as the men were ready, the RIrqAF's Vincent Flight transferred to Shaibah aerodrome outside Basra on 2 January 1940. Here they operated alongside RAF units, primarily carrying out shipping protection and anti-submarine patrols over the western end of the Persian Gulf. This would theoretically remain their duty throughout the Second World War. In the meantime, the personnel of the Independent Vincent Flight were replaced every three months, along with the Flight's Commander. The first to be placed in charge was Mulazim

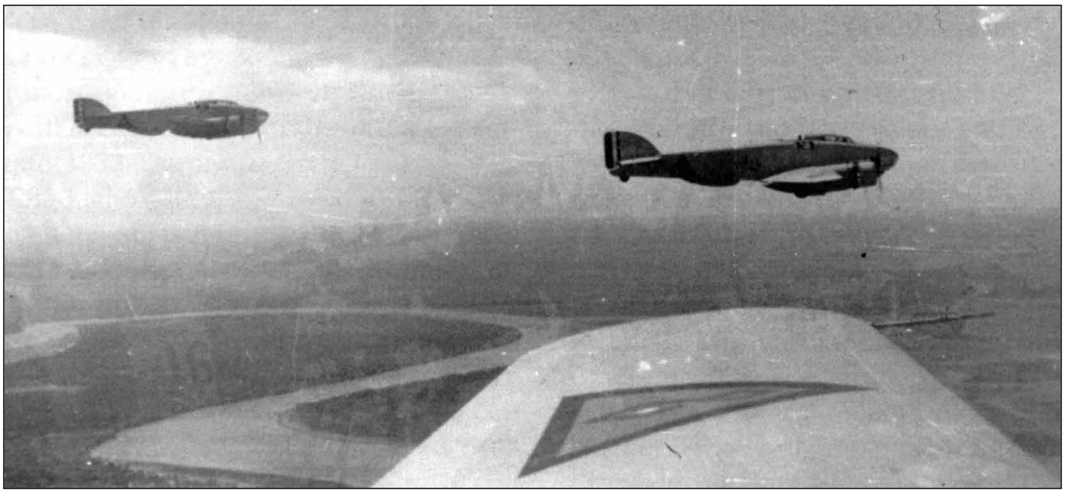
Tayyar Fayiq al-Sa'adi, followed by *Mulazim Tayyar* Khalil Shafik and *Mulazim Tayyar* Ghayath al-Ramadani.

While the current Iraqi government's support for Britain and her allies was resented by more enthusiastic Iraqi nationalists, the situation remained calm for several months. In January 1940, however, Prime Minister Nuri al-Sa'id reacted to the murder of one of his government ministers by removing those he regarded as disloyal. But rather than strengthening his position, this action weakened it and on 18 February Nuri al-Sa'id had to resign. Fearing a move by the Golden Square of senior Army officers, the Regent of Iraq, Prince Abd al-Ilah, persuaded rival politicians to form a coalition government headed by Rashid Ali al-Kaylani (al-Gaylani). The British were far from pleased, even though their friends Nuri al-Sa'id and Taha al-Hashimi were included as Foreign Minister and Minister of Defence respectively. Furthermore, al-Kaylani's continued refusal to declare war on Germany particularly irked Winston Churchill who became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom on 10 May 1940.

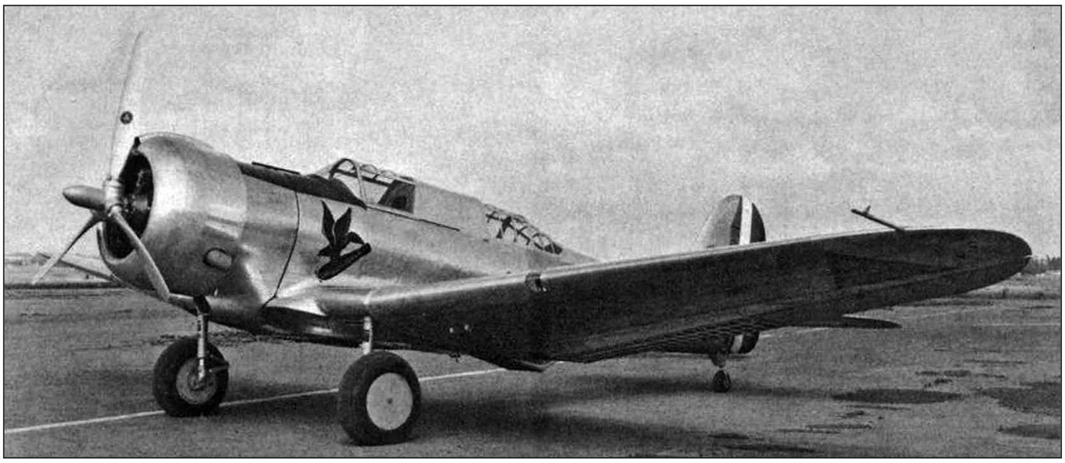


A rare but poor-quality photograph of Royal Iraqi Air Force Savoia-Marchetti SM.79B bombers under guard at night in Iraq. (Iraqi Air Force)

Meanwhile, Iraqi relations with Italy remained reasonably good until the latter entered the war on 10 June 1940. Deliveries of military aircraft, munitions and support equipment had continued up to that point and between April and May 1940 eight spare propellers were supplied, along with cockpit instrumentation, engines spares, sighting for a dozen machine guns and a variety of paints, including white, red, green and black for RIrqAF national markings. However, there were increasing problems at the Italian end where the demands of the Italian *Regia Aeronautica* took precedence, especially in the light of a British military build-up in Egypt which the Italian government regarded as potentially threatening. Thus, most material supplied to Iraq had been declared outdated stock. For Breda aircraft this involved the Breda company having to salvage various items from the backs of its warehouses. Nevertheless, the Italian government still hoped to draw Iraq into the Axis camp.



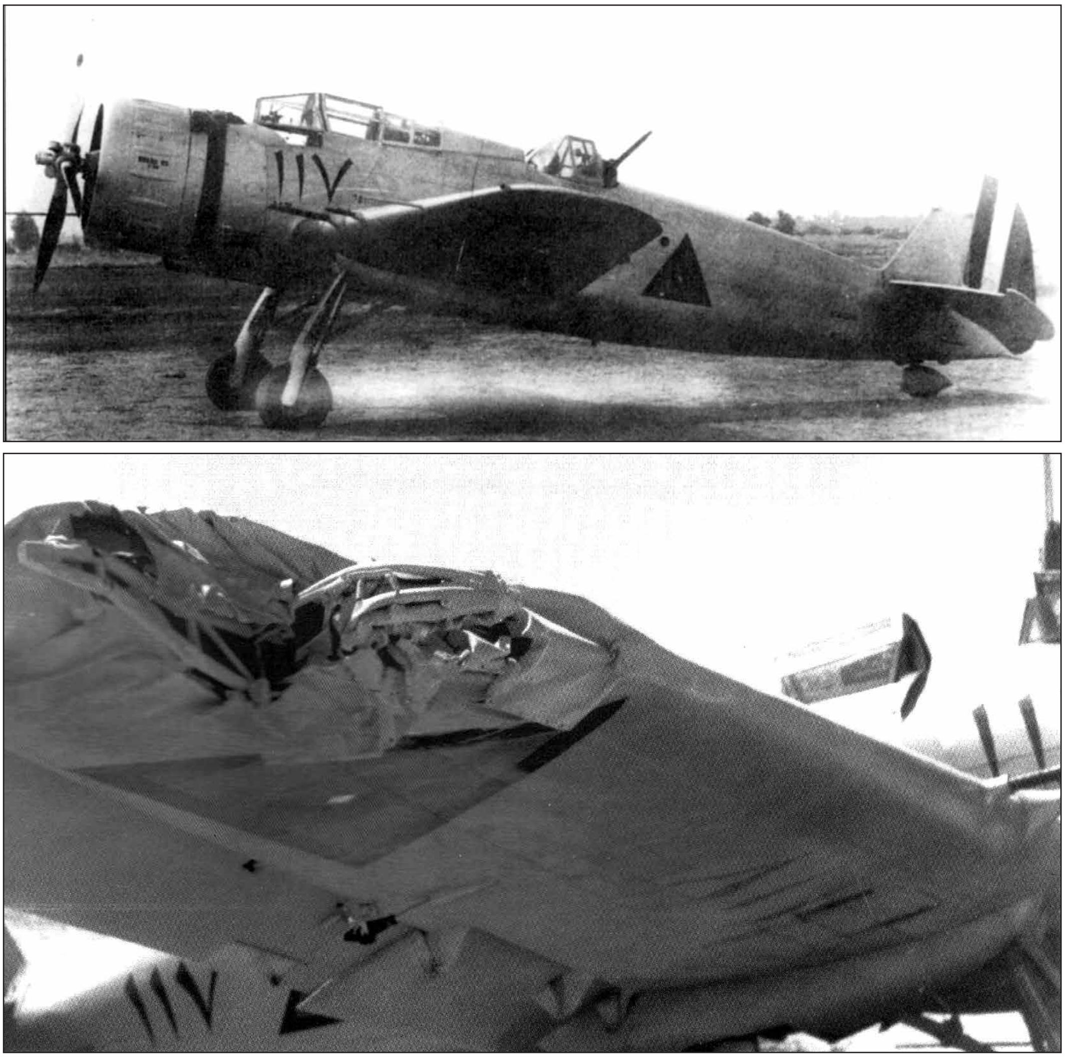
Two Savoia-Marchetti SM.79Bs of the Royal Iraqi Air Force in flight over the river Euphrates or Tigris in Iraq, photographed from a third SM.79B. (via Garello)



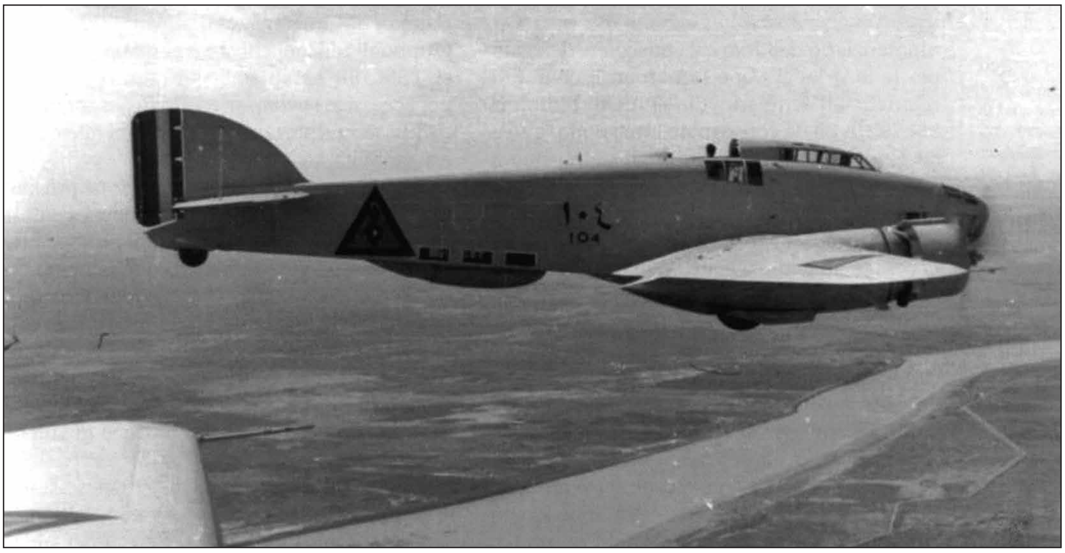
A Douglas 8A-4 dive-bomber of the RIrAF shortly after its delivery to Iraq in 1940. The serial numbers allocated to these aeroplanes ran from 131 to 145 and the machines were also decorated with an early version of No. 7 Squadron RIrAF's insignia. (Author's collection)

Italy was not the only country, apart from the United Kingdom, from where the Iraqi government hoped to obtain modern military aircraft. Fifteen Douglas DB-8A-4 attack bombers would be acquired from the USA in 1940 (numbers 131 to 145). An initial visit by an Iraqi mission to America, led by Nasir al-Janabi, was soon followed by another headed by Major Mahmud al-Hindi who had been trained at the RAF's Central Flying School in England. In the USA, al-Hindi was described as the son of a prince and he personally tested a DB-8A-4 aeroplane at the Douglas factory in Santa Monica, California. Another squadron, No. 7, was therefore established as 15 Douglas DB-8A-4 bombers arrived by ship at Basra and on 15 September 1940 this new unit formally came into being at Hinaidi. However, a second ship carrying No. 7 Squadron's weaponry failed to arrive, having been seized in Singapore.

Around the same time that the RIrqAF obtained dive-bombers from the USA, it acquired Gloster Gladiator



Breda Ba.65 (serial 117) of No. 5 Squadron, Royal Iraqi Air Force. This machine was involved in at least one accident, when its right wing was damaged. The Ba.65 was, in fact, a difficult machine to fly, with several lost in accidents. (Albert Grandolini collection)



One of the first delivery of Savoia-Marchetti SM.79B bombers (number 104) to the RIrAF, flying over one of Iraq's great rivers, the Tigris or the Euphrates, shortly before landing at Baghdad in October 1938. (Garello collection)

fighters and Avro Anson light bombers from Britain. Nine of the 15 Gladiators that had been ordered arrived during 1940, transferred from RAF Middle East Command. They came from Gloster's first production batch initially supplied to the RAF back in 1937 and sent to RAF Middle East Command in Egypt earlier in 1940. The examples which were eventually transferred to the RIrqAF included ex-RAF serial numbers K6140, K6141, K6147, K7897, K7928, K7907, K7947, K7989 and K8005. They would be based at Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid) and Mosul (Mu'askar al-Firnas), although maintenance was carried out by the RAF at Habbaniya in west-central Iraq. A further batch of Gladiators, to be given the serial numbers 146 to 150, were ordered in October 1940 but were not delivered.

If the Iraqi government thought that it could avoid direct involvement in the Second World War, it would rapidly learn otherwise. The possibility that the Nazi–Soviet Pact might develop into a closer and more active alliance remained a major worry for Britain and France during the early part of the war. German access to the USSR's abundant raw materials was of such concern that Allied planners started to focus on the Baku oilfields, on the western shore of the Caspian Sea. Hitler did, of course, have his eye on these but intended to control them through conquest rather than by cultivating his new-found friendship with Stalin.

In the meantime, General Joseph Vuillemin, the commanding officer of the *Armée de l'Air Française*, urged the French and British governments to give serious attention to a plan whereby the Allies would use their bases in the Arab Middle East to attack Soviet oil production facilities, the most important of which were in Azerbaijan. Squadrons of British bombers based in Iraq and French bombers based in Syria could, it was believed, inflict so much damage that Soviet oil production in the Caucasus region might be reduced by a half within three, or perhaps even within two, months. This would, according to the proponents of the plan, not only have 'decisive repercussions on Russia and Germany' but would also disrupt 'the industrial and agricultural economies of Russia which would be incrementally paralysed and prevented from working. It will eliminate all the hopes that Germany had of rationally organising Russian production for its benefit and will, from this viewpoint, have a decisive influence on the outcome of the war'.

The fact that, to carry out such an air campaign, the neutrality of Iran and perhaps also of Turkey, would be violated was presumably considered but appears to have been brushed aside. A subsequent version offered even rosier projections, with fewer attack groups delivering similar gains more quickly. Such ideas were, of course, overtaken by Hitler's western offensives and the fall of France. Almost exactly a year later, Germany invaded the USSR, and instead of sending bombers to attack the Soviet oilfields, the British were soon looking for ways of sending supplies from bases in the Middle East to help Britain's new Soviet ally.

In May 1940, the month that Germany invaded France, Britain signed a treaty with Turkey, partly in response to the Nazi–Soviet Pact. Iran, however, continued to be seen as a potential threat to British interests in the Middle East and this fear resulted in a New Joint Defence Plan between Iraq and the United Kingdom. A British government memo summarised the Iraqi situation thus:

> Possible Enemies: Of the States bordering Iraq, Turkey is allied to Great Britain and is a signatory of the Sa'adaban Pact [a non-aggression treaty signed by Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in 1937 which was intended to last until July 1942]; Saudi-Arabia is considered as unlikely to be aggressively hostile; whilst Trans-Jordan and Kuwait are in the British orbit for foreign affairs, and Syria is in the French orbit. Under present conditions [in May 1940, before the fall of France], therefore, the only possible enemy whose frontier marches with Iraq, is Iran [the British seemed to believe that Iranian adherence to the Sa'adaban Pact could not be relied upon]. The danger of attack by USSR through Iran, either with the assistance or connivance of that country or after overcoming Iranian resistance, must, however, be taken seriously into consideration.

The memo continued: 'Iraq, as an ally of Great Britain, has severed diplomatic relations with Germany but is unlikely to enter the war unless her territory is threatened or attacked.' Nevertheless, the likelihood of a direct threat from Iran was dismissed unless Iran was forced into action by the Soviet Union.

The Imperial Iranian Air Force (IIAF) was significantly more powerful than that of Iraq, at least in terms of types and numbers of aeroplanes. According to a British official assessment dated 30 June 1940 – eight days after a defeated France signed an armistice agreement with Germany – the IIAF consisted of the following:

1st Regiment (based at Qila Murgha, Tehran)
  No. 1 Squadron; 5 x Hawker Fury, 10 x Hawker Hind, 1 x Hawker Hurricane, 6 x DH Moth
  No. 2 Squadron; 5 x Hawker Fury, 10 x Hawker Hind, 6 x DH Moth
  No. 3 Squadron; 5 x Hawker Fury, 13 x Hawker Hind, 6 x DH Moth

2nd Regiment (based at Tabriz)
  No. 1 Squadron; 4 x Hawker Fury, 14 x Hawker Audax, 6 x DH Moth

3rd Regiment (based at Mashad)
  4 x Hawker Fury, 12 x Hawker Audax, 6 x DH Moth

4th Regiment (based at Ahwaz)
  10 x Hawker Audax, 3 x Airspeed Oxford, 6 x DH Moth

5th Regiment (repair base or factory, based at Doshantappeh, Tehran)
  1 x Hawker Fury, 20 x Hawker Hind under construction, 2 x DH Rapide, 5 x DH Moth

Flying Training School (based at Mehrabad, Tehran)
  24 x Hawker Audax, 2 x Hawker Hind, 51 x DH Moth

Meanwhile the RIrqAF suffered two fatal accidents during 1940, both resulting from the challenges posed by its new Italian aeroplanes. One happened on the first day of the year when a Breda Ba.65 of No. 5 Squadron flown by *Mulazim Thani Tayyar* Abd al-Hamid al-Samra'ayi stalled and crashed while turning at low altitude south of Rustamiyah on the south-eastern edge of Baghdad. No. 4 Squadron also suffered a fatal accident on 18 February 1940. This time a Gladiator flown by *Mulazim Thani Tayyar* Shuka al-Nakkash

What appear to be several versions of the Iraqi Army Mechanized Brigade's Lanchester armoured cars in a military parade during the early part of the Second World War. (Albert Grandolini collection)

A display of the Iraqi Army's Lanchester armoured cars early in the Second World War. An earlier design of Lanchester armoured cars had served in Iraq, Iran and Armenia during the First World War, proving their reliability by driving some 85,000km across deserts and mountains, much further than any other vehicles during the Great War. (A. Grandolini photo)

This photograph of one of the RIrAF's Hawker Nisr "Iraqi Audaxes" was probably taken on 11 May 1935 when No. 3 Squadron presented its flag to King Ghazi. The aeroplane has diagonal, coloured stripes around its fuselage, immediately behind the triangular national insignia. (Albert Grandolini coll.)

hit the ground in very bad weather near Fallujah in the west of the country (not to be confused with the village of Falujah in Palestine).

According to the British, the RIrqAF's operational role in the event of war would be directed against enemy aerodromes within range, including those from which short-range aircraft might operate in support of land forces or from which long-range aircraft could carry out strategic bombing. Other targets would include enemy lines of communication, military concentrations and 'any similar military objectives'. British official documents also made clear what Britain expected Iraq to do so as an ally but when it was not itself at war with a neighbouring country. Apparently, the Iraqis' main task was to expand their own forces, but they were also '…to protect the Basrah-Baghdad-Ramadi-Rutbah Lines of Communication'. Beyond this, Iraqi forces were to maintain internal security, defend oil installations, keep the Shatt al-Arab waterway open in the far south of the country, and '…to take steps to watch her frontiers for possible land and air aggressions'. On top of this was an expectation that the Iraqis would continue to improve the country's aerodromes and smaller landing grounds.

However, if there was a direct threat from the Imperial Iranian Air Force, the RIrqAF had a more specific role: 'The Royal Iraqi Air Force, possibly less a detachment at Basra, to concentrate in conjunction with the Royal Air Force in preparation for attacking enemy L. of C. [Lines of Communication] where it passes through the defiles of the Iranian mountains' – in other words, to target vulnerable passes through the Zagros and other ranges along the Iraq-Iran frontier. The Iraqis would get support from the British in this effort. 'In particular, the RAF squadrons to co-operate with the RIAF [RIrqAF] in offensive bombing action against hostile land forces.' Meanwhile the RAF was largely to concentrate at Habbaniya: 'Any RAF aircraft which can be made available at Shaibah to co-operate with the RIAF [RIrqAF] in that area in offensive action against any advance by hostile forces against Basra and the Shatt al-Arab.'

Then came the catastrophic fall of France in June 1940, after which the British informed the Iraqi government that additional British troops would be deployed near Basra, Baghdad and Mosul while the strategically vital road between Basra and Haifa in Palestine would be significantly upgraded. At that time, the position of the French mandate authorities in Syria and Lebanon remained uncertain, and there was fear that German or Italian forces might take over. Meanwhile some in Baghdad, as elsewhere around the world, were convinced that Great Britain was about to lose the war. Rashid Ali al-Kaylani (al-Gaylani) therefore responded to the British announcement by trying to extract concessions from what he and his ministers thought was a weakened Britain. In fact, the Iraqi government offered to declare war on Germany and Italy, which had now entered the war, if London agreed to a complete British withdrawal not only from Iraq but also from Palestine.

They also requested deliveries of significantly more advanced weaponry for the Iraqi armed forces. These demands in turn convinced the new British government, under the anti-Arab and deeply imperialist Winston Churchill, that al-Kaylani's government was, in their words, 'influenced by Nazi Germany'. The Iraqi requests were flatly refused.

Mahmud Salman al-Janabi was still in command of the RIrqAF in May 1940, when a British report gave its strength as the following: one army cooperation squadron, though this was planned to be increased to two squadrons by October 1940, two fighter squadrons, one of which could be used for low-level bombing, one medium bomber squadron which only had five aeroplanes, and a communications squadron of nine aeroplanes. The RIrqAF's bomber force was due to be augmented by another light bomber squadron in October 1940. At the end of June 1940, the Iraqi squadrons would be located as follows:

No. 1 (Army Cooperation) Squadron, based at Mosul, with one flight (General Purpose) known as 'Z' Squadron based at Baghdad (Hinaidi).

No. 2 (Communications) Squadron based at Baghdad (Hinaidi).

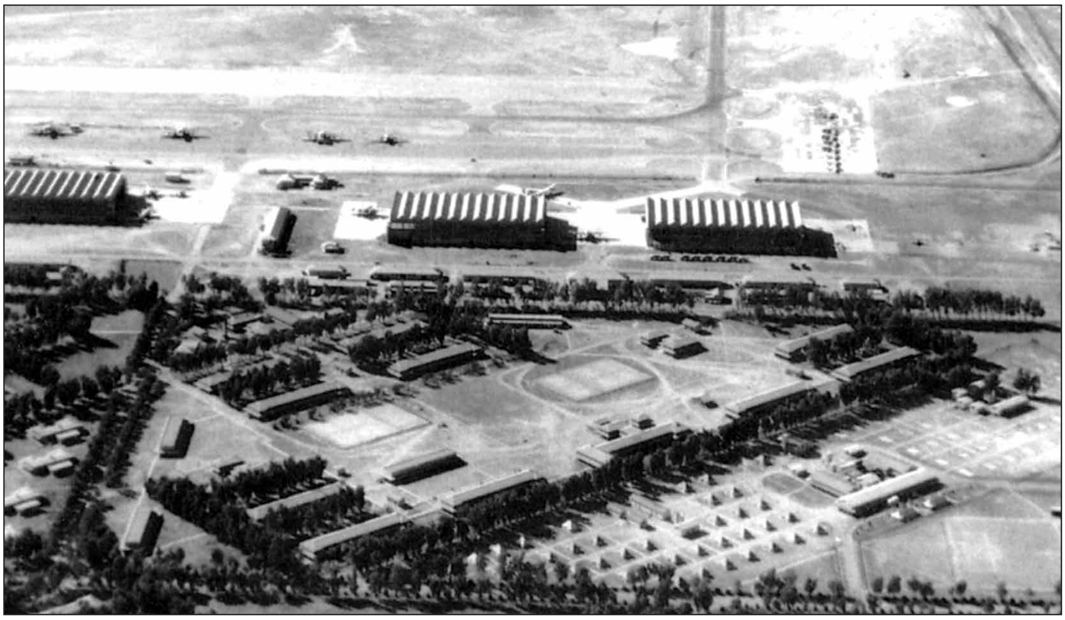
No. 4 (Fighter) Squadron based at Kirkuk, having moved there on 18 May 1940.

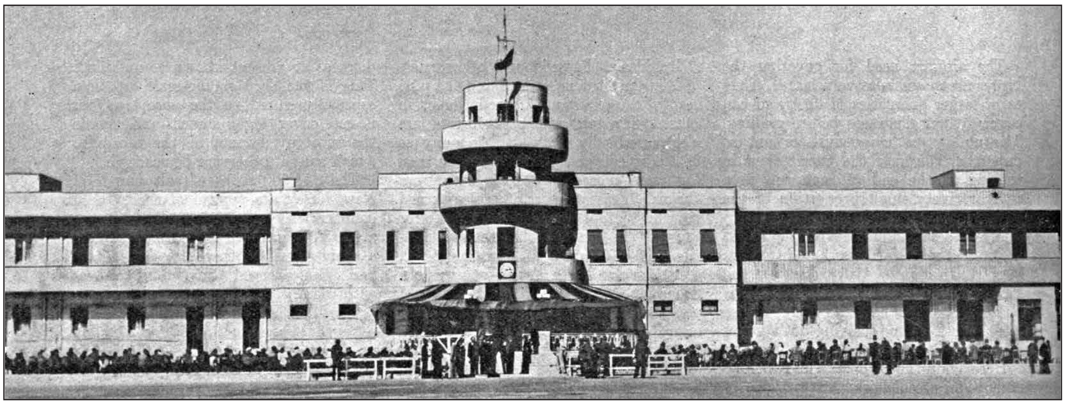
No. 5 (Fighter-Bomber) Squadron based at Baghdad (Hinaidi).

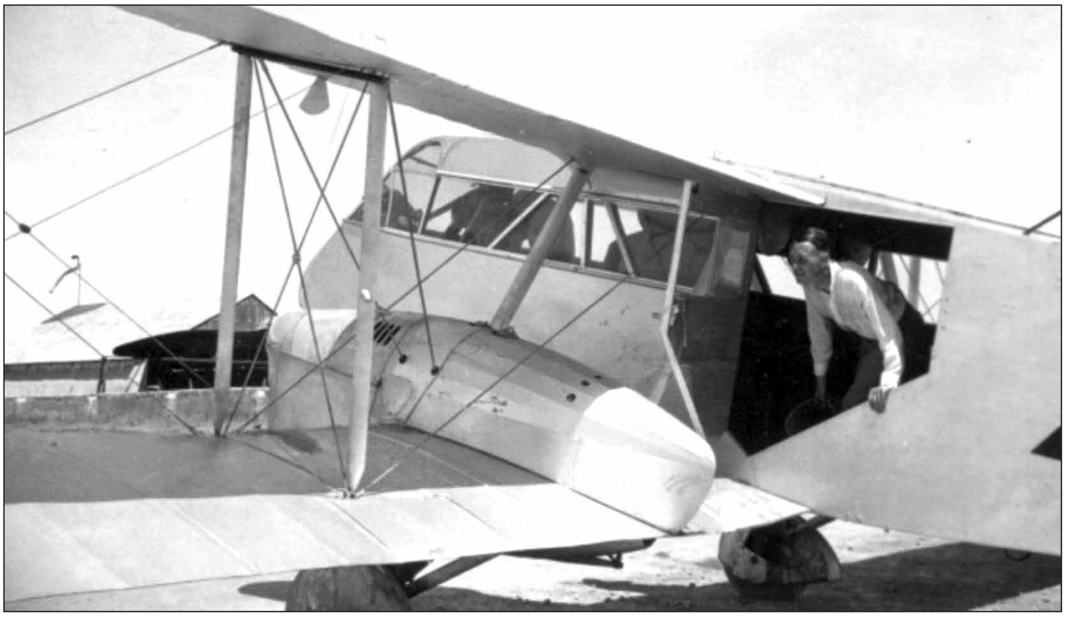
No. 6 (Bomber) Squadron based at Baghdad (Hinaidi) with only five aircraft.

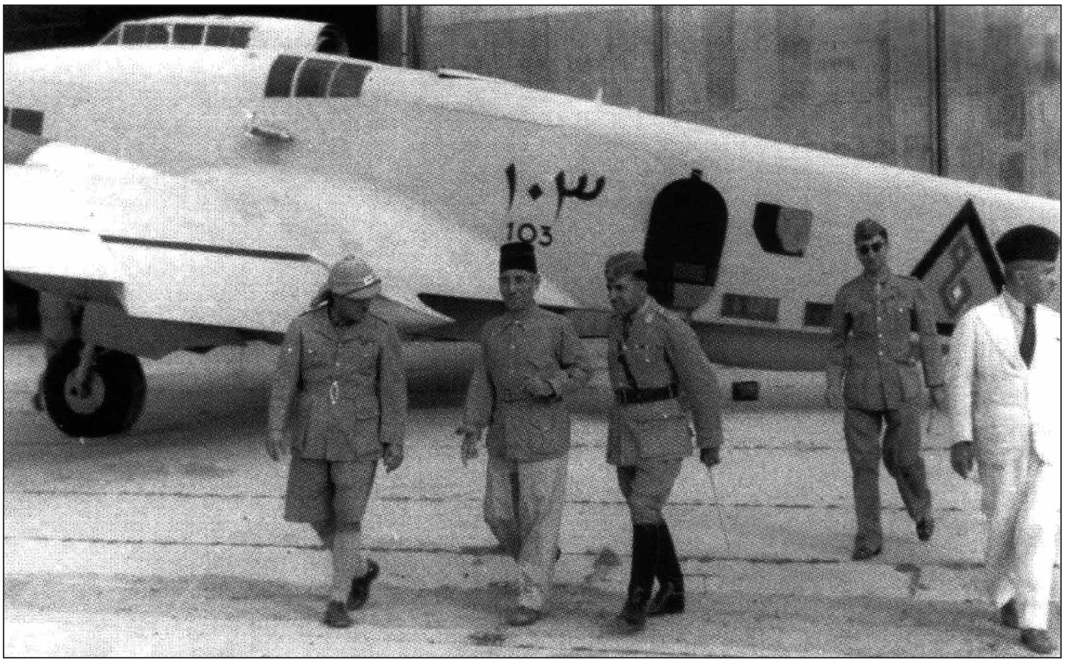
No. 7 (Bomber) Squadron based at Baghdad (Hinaidi) was rarely mentioned, though some of its aircraft were clearly operational.

The only change in command appears to have been when *Ra'is Awal (Ra'id)* Hamid Amar took over the leadership of No. 1 Squadron, where he remained until 1941, and Captain Majd al-Din al-Naqib took over at the head of No. 3 Squadron.

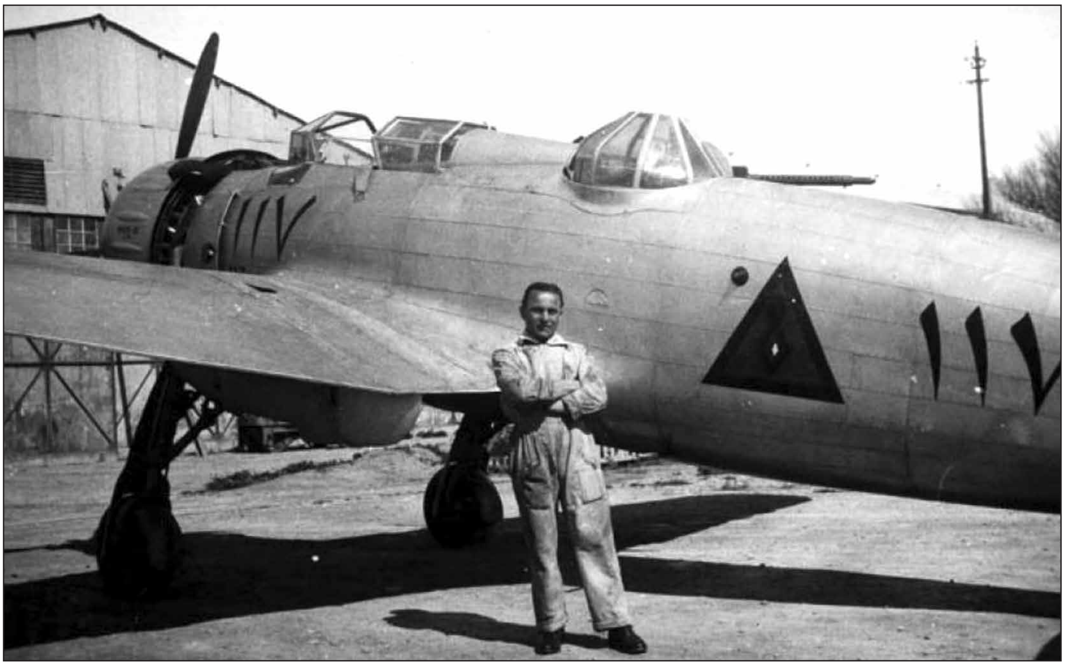

Mu'askar al-Rashid, Baghdad's military aerodrome, with four RIrAF DH.84M Dragons on the apron and other unidentified aeroplanes next to the hangers. (Albert Grandolini collection)


The new terminal of Basra airport which had been opened on 25 March 1938. However, when Iraq went to war with the British Empire in 1941, the RIrAF unit at Basra came to be seen as a potential threat to the nearly RAF aerodrome of Shaibah. (Fleetway archive)


De Havilland DH.84 Dragon of Royal Iraqi Air Force in Iraq, probably photographed during the first year of the war. (Albert Grandolini collection)



Savoia-Marchetti SM.79B (serial number 103) being inspected by King Ghazi I and senior members of the Iraqi government. The man on the far left wears the old-fashioned British imperial style of pith helmet or solar topee, though with an additional neck-protecting cloth attached to the back. (via Garello)



A Breda Ba 65 (serial number 117) ground-attack aircraft of the RIrAF photographed in Iraq, probably around the time of the start of the Second World War. (Albert Grandolini collection)

An unusually detailed report on the condition of aerodromes and smaller landing grounds across Iraq was drawn up by the Iraqis and British at the end of June 1940. There were a substantial number of such airfields, several of which were currently being made suitable for modern aeroplanes. Others marked as already suitable were sufficiently large, with sufficiently good approaches and surfaces to enable modern RAF aircraft to operate from them. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily mean that these modernised aerodromes could be used by the RIrqAF's large SM.79B bombers, or even by Iraq's Breda Ba.65 ground-attack aircraft. Meanwhile aerodromes and landing grounds without runways were usually unserviceable for one or two days after heavy rain.

In what was designated as the Northern Area there were 15 airfields, including six belonging to oil and other companies. Here it is worth noting that the increasingly powerful corporate organisation called the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), of which the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (subsequently the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) was a constituent element, already had its own fleet of aeroplanes. This consisted of a de Havilland DH.84 Dragon (G-ACKB) and two de Havilland DH.89A Dragon Rapides (G-ACZE and G-ACZF), originally belonging to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company which had acquired them in 1933–34. Three of these machines would be taken over by the British RAF in July 1940, as France fell to Nazi assault. They would also play a sometimes secret role in the tense relationship between British-dominated areas of the Arab Middle East and what became 'Vichy' French Syria and Lebanon, and then again during the Anglo–Iraq War of May 1941.

Of the airfields in the Northern Region of Iraq, seven were being upgraded. All military aerodromes in this part of the country had been handed over to the RIrqAF, which currently used Mosul (Mu'askar al-Firnas had already been modernised) and Kirkuk (Mu'askar al-Hurriyajh was already modernised). The RIrqAF also used Baquba (also known as Khan Bani Sa'ad), Irbil, Sharaban, Sarsian, Simil, Tal Kutchik and Tal Sirwal (Sirval), all of which were currently being modernised, though most did not, of course, have resident squadrons. Apart from these airfields there were others belonging to the RIrqAF which were considered capable of being made suitable for modern aircraft: namely al-Badi, Baiji, Khanaqin, Uglat, Qaraghan and Samarra, plus T.1 which belonged to the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). RIrqAF landing grounds suitable only for old-type aircraft were al-Hatra, Altunküpru (Altun Kupri), Ana, Balad, Biliyah, Diyana, Taish Khabur, Halabja, Khurmal, Mandali, Penj'in, Sulaymaniyah and Zakhu, plus the commercially owned landing ground at Awasil.

In the Southern Area of Iraq, as designated by the RAF, those already suitable or currently being made suitable for modern aeroplanes were Baghdad and Basra Airports (both belonging to the Iraqi government), Habbaniya and Shaibah which were under British RAF control, plus H.2 and H.3 belonging to the IPC. This left already-modernised Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid) and al-Diwaniya, plus currently being modernised Landing Ground 5 (LG.5) to the

An unidentified member of Iraq's Hashemite royal family standing on the wing of one of the RIrAF's newly delivered Douglas bombers. Also visible is the seemingly handwritten Arabic number 140 or 40 on the leading edge of the wing, though this may have been added to the photograph rather than the aircraft. (Albert Grandolini collection)

A pair of Gloster Gladiators of the RIrAF's No. 4 Squadron, with serial numbers 84 and probably 90. The "four balls" insignia on their fuselages has been described either as a squadron insignia or an indication of which Flight the aircraft belonged to: red for the First Flight, blue for the Second and green for the Third. (Garello collection)

RIrqAF. Six other landing grounds capable of being made suitable for modern aircraft were owned by the RIrqAF at Nukhaib, Karbala, Amarah, Lussuf, al-Busayyah, and Aziziyah. Other landing grounds suitable only for old types in the Southern Region were Kut al-Imara, Shabisha, al-Salman (Salman Pak), Ur, Shattra, Ali Gharbi, Hillah, Imam Hamza, Nasiriyah, al-Samawah, Badrah and Kufa, all of which belonging to the RIrqAF.

Later in May 1940, the Italian Air Force's *Tenente* Guza returned to Italy and the Iraqis were now on their own with their Italian aircraft. Guza's departure should also have been a sign to the British that Italy would soon enter the war, which it did on 10 June 1940. The Mediterranean and North Africa now became zones of full-scale conflict, so the RAF moved its most important overseas flying-training base, No. 4 Service Flying Training School (SFTS), from Abu Suwayr in Egypt to Habbaniya in Iraq. Unfortunately, there were many in Iraq and in its armed forces who did not welcome this increased British military presence.

Meanwhile the role of British military advisors in Iraq continued, as it did in Egypt. Where the Iraqi and Egyptian air forces were concerned, the British government considered the secondment of RAF personnel to be militarily and politically important enough to continue, despite the RAF's urgent need for experienced men elsewhere. According to a British government memorandum dated 14 August 1940:

> …the number of airmen lent to British Military Missions is to be maintained at the same level as at the commencement of the war, subject to the reservation that the Egyptian and Iraqi Air Forces, must, as far as possible, carry their proportion of the general deficiency. We appreciate the necessity for this reservation, but as those Air Forces depend largely on the guidance of the British Non-Commissioned Officers it appears unwise to withdraw a number of those Non-Commissioned Officers until it is known that some at least will be replaced within a short period.

The specialist skills of British NCOs seconded to the RIrqAF indicated what was needed at the time. They included a Fitter (Warrant Officer B.W. Carter), a Metal Rigger (Flight Sergeant Penwarn) and an Armourer (Flight Sergeant Easton). There was, however, a turn-over of personnel and during the summer of 1940 twelve men were relieved though not all were replaced. Three were pilots; Flight Sergeantt Mansell (relieved on 9 September 1940), Flight Sergeant Barnes (relieved on 16 August 1940) and Flight Sergeant Smith (relieved on 11 July 1940). They were replaced by Flight Sergeant Adams (on 24 August 1940), Flight Sergeant Pitcher and Sergeant Bethel who were, at the time this report was written, awaiting passage from Britain. Quite how they felt about leaving their country at the height of the Battle of Britain is unrecorded. The nine other RAF men in Iraq were ground crew and administrative staff.

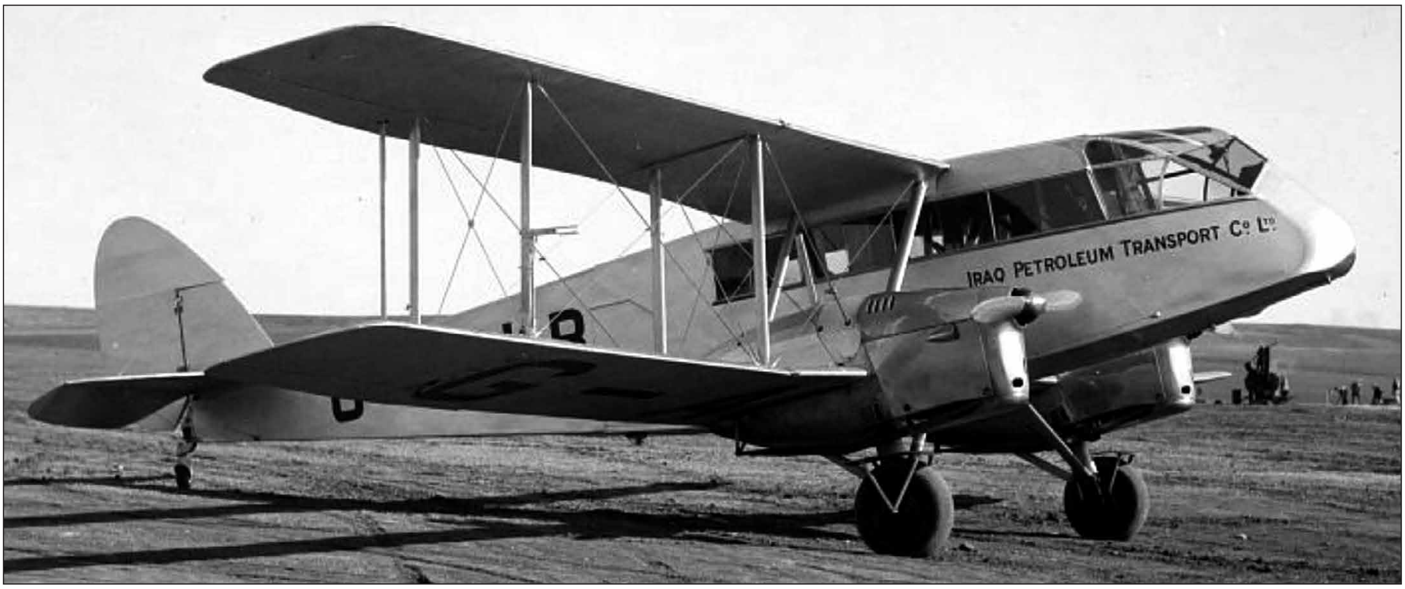
Sadly, the Iraqis suffered a further fatality in September 1940; this time over or close to Kirkuk aerodrome when *Mulazim Thani Tayyar* Fakhri al-Bagury of No. 4 Squadron had to bail out of his Gladiator at low altitude – too low for his parachute to open fully. Nevertheless, by the end of the year the RIrqAF nominally had six operational squadrons flying a few Avro Ansons, de Havilland DH.84 Dragons, de Havilland DH.90 Dragonfly transports, 15

Al-Aqaid al-Tayar Muhammad Ali Jawad, the influential senior staff officer of the RIrAF who was appointed Director of the Iraqi Air Force following the Iraqi coup of 29 October 1936. He would be assassinated during a counter coup on 11 August the following year. (Iraqi Air Force archive)

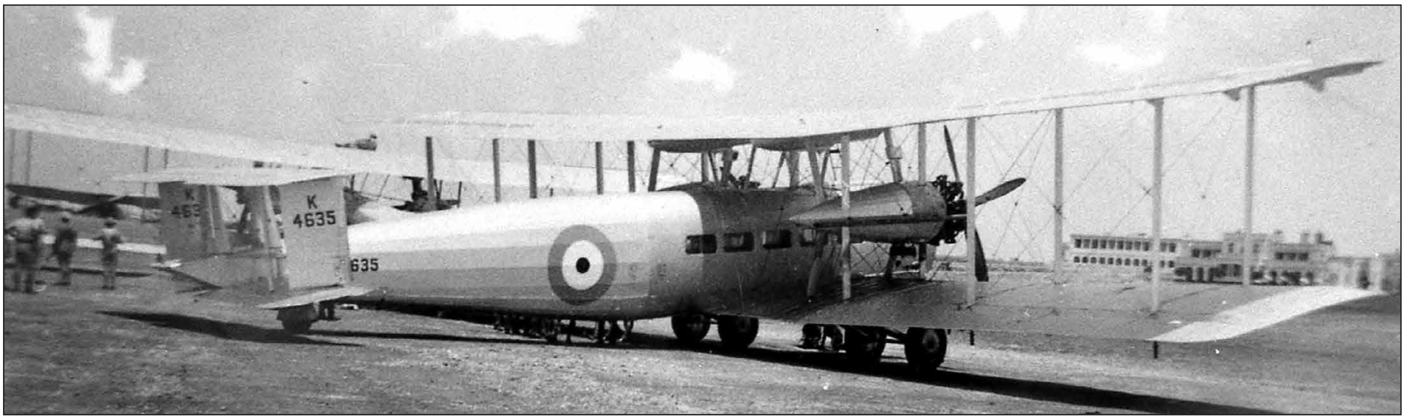
Douglas DB-8A-4 attack bombers and nine Gloster Gladiator Mk. I fighters. No. 2 Squadron's Gladiators still operated from Mosul and Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid). The latter was also home to the Douglas 8A-4 bombers of No. 2 Squadron which had been formed on 15 September under the command of Major Mahmud al-Hindi. He remained in command until 2 October 1941.

Meanwhile, the Independent Vincent Flight moved back to Baghdad on 1 August 1940, to be merged with the No. 2 Squadron. Like the Royal Egyptian Air Force, the Royal Iraqi Air Force needed skilled and experienced men trained in staff working at the top. That was why officers such as Abbas Hia'a had been sent on specialist staff courses. He graduated from the Staff College on 24 November 1940 and eventually rose to become Commander of the Iraqi Air Force. Another future Air Force commander, Nadhir Munir Hilmi Muhi al-Din, graduated from the Iraqi Military College in the same month. Later in his career he would also study aerospace engineering in the United Kingdom.

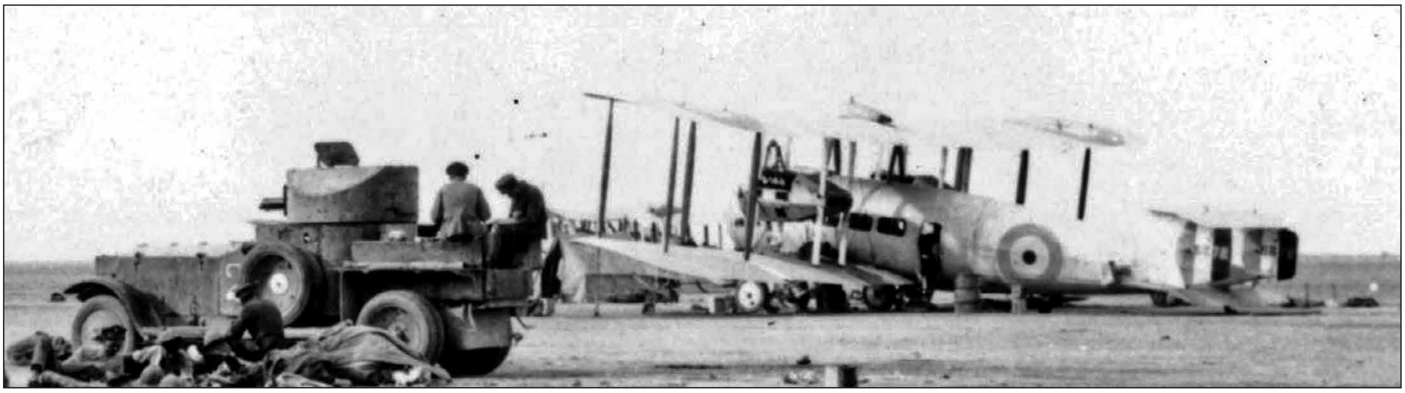
Nevertheless, several of RIrqAF's frontline squadrons were significantly below their nominal strength at the start of 1941. No. 1 (Army Coop.) Squadron was based at Mosul with Hawker Nisrs, 35 of these aeroplanes having been purchased in 1934, the last five having arrived during 1940 (serial numbers 125 to 130). This was nominally enough for two squadrons, though only one unit was actually equipped with Nisrs. Furthermore, some 25 of No. 1 Squadron's machines were currently not airworthy. The Gladiators of No. 4 (Fighter) Squadron were at Kirkuk (Mu'askar al-Hurriyah), 15 having been acquired from the RAF in 1939 but only around nine were airworthy. No.



The Iraq Petroleum Company had its own fleet of aeroplanes before the outbreak of the Second World War, consisting of a de Havilland DH.84 Dragon (G-ACKB) and two de Havilland DH.89A Dragon Rapides (G-ACZE and G-ACZF). Two of these machines would be taken over by the British RAF in July 1940, DH.84 Dragon G-ACKB becoming AX863 and DH.89A Dragon Rapide G-ACZE becoming Z7266. Thereafter they played an often secret role in the tense relationship between British-dominated areas of the Arab Middle East and what became "Vichy" French Syria and Lebanon. (Author's collection)



Vickers Valentia I troop carrier (serial number K4635) *City of Peshawar* of No. 31 Squadron RAF. It was probably photographed at Basra in Iraq or in what is now Pakistan. After the unit became a bomber-transport squadron, the *City of Peshawar* had bomb racks fitted under the wings, between the engines and the fuselage. (Woodroffe family archive)



A Vickers Valentia, probably of No. 31 Squadron RTAF (serial number unknown) and an armoured car of the RAF Regiment in Iraq. (Albert Grandolini collection)

5 (Fighter) Squadron was at Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid) outside Baghdad with Breda Ba.65s and No. 7 (Bomber) Squadron was based at Hinaidi (Mu'askar al-Rashid) with Douglas 8A-4s. Also at Hinaidi were four Savoia SM.79B bombers, along with miscellaneous DH Dragons with racks for 20lb bombs and dorsal gun positions, plus Dragon Rapides, Dragonflies, Ansons and Tiger Moths.

Indeed, the RIrqAF's shortage of spares reached such a critical point that between January and April 1941, Iraqi pilots only flew an average of two hours per month, often on aeroplanes whose replacement parts were actually old items which Iraqi technical crews had returned to usable condition. No. 4 Squadron would also soon suffer a further loss at Kirkuk with *Mulazim Tayyar* Naguib Nagi being killed when his Gladiator stalled and crashed during an experimental scramble and an attempt to gain altitude too quickly. It would seem that the RAF advisors were still needed or, if present, were not always listened to.

According to a British government document dated 24 March 1941, Wing Commander J.G. Hawtrey was currently Inspector of the RIrqAF, with Flight Lieutenant H.E. Brushwood as his assistant. The British Air Mission included 14 other men, three being pilots: Flight Sergeant. F.C. Adams had been in post since 24 August 1940, Warrant Officer D.L. Pitcher since 5 February 1941 (an unmarried man on a 24-year RAF engagement) and Sergeant R. Bithell also since 5 February 1941 (a married man on a 12-year engagement). The rest were ground crew, while two further men selected for secondment to Iraq had yet to arrive.

The Conditions of Service for RAF personnel sent to the RIrqAF reflected the attitudes of the time, seeking to attract volunteers because, 'Outstations occasionally however provide good opportunities for shooting and keen shots are advised to bring a gun with them.' On the other hand, 'Wives are not permitted to accompany their husbands on first appointment. Under certain special circumstances they may be allowed to join their husbands after approximately one year. Children are not allowed to be brought to the country under any circumstances.' Furthermore, 'NCOs are required to wear Royal Iraqi Air Force uniform during working hours.' Meanwhile the pay was good.

At Habbaniya, which would later find itself at the centre of the Anglo–Iraq War, the RAF was busy; the airbase being home to around 1,000 RAF personnel, an engineering depot, a Communications Flight, No. 4 Service Flying Training School and various support services. Like Shaibah airbase in the far south of the country it was defended by an Armoured Car Company of the RAF Regiment which also had a small number of tanks and tankettes. They were supported by a considerably larger force of local Iraqi auxiliaries, including six companies of the Assyrian Levies numbering around 1,200 men under the command of about 20 British Army officers. It was over these isolated RAF bases that the storm would soon break, especially at Habbaniya overlooking the River Euphrates west of Baghdad.

3

EGYPT AS A NON-BELLIGERENT ALLY

THE EGYPTIAN ARMY

At the start of the Second World War the Egyptian Army numbered approximately 23,000 men, which would rise to some 100,000 by the end of the conflict. Nevertheless, it is still widely believed that Egypt's armed forces played no significant part in the war – a view which is simplistic and sometimes deeply prejudiced. Yet the roles played by the Egyptian Army, the REAF, the Egyptian Coastguard

Ahmad Isma'il in a pre-flight discussion with the pilot of unidentified aeroplane at Almaza, probably around 1939. The man with one foot on the machine's wing appears to be Prince Abbas Halim. (Ahmad Ismail photo)

force and other uniformed services was not a very active one. Their tasks tended to be tedious and unglamorous, often static or even passive while still enduring enemy attack and suffering casualties. Meanwhile the Egyptian population as a whole suffered significantly under enemy bombardment, in many cases while working in direct support of the Allied war effort.

The Sudan Defence force was now separate from the Egyptian Army, playing a more active and recognised role during the war, but there was also one Egyptian infantry battalion stationed in Sudan. The other nine Egyptian infantry battalions were based in Egypt itself. Their training remained poor, priority having been given by the Egyptian military command and their British advisors to anti-aircraft batteries, coastal defence artillery and a small mechanised 'cavalry' unit. According to reports by the British Advisory Mission, the Egyptian Ministry of Defence was chaotic and the discipline 'varied'. Furthermore, there were serious shortages of trained NCOs and technical equipment.

A few days before the outbreak of the war, a British Military Mission report stated, apparently with some surprise, that '…the anti-aircraft regiment is really good.' However, the pride of the Egyptian Army during these first years of the Second World War was its Mobile Force, otherwise called the South-West Force. It had seemingly evolved out of a British suggestion that Egypt raise an Arab Bedouin corps, officered by the sons of sheikhs, to defend Western Desert oases which were considered vulnerable to attack by Italian mechanised forces across the Western or Libyan Desert. This concept, based upon a romantic British view of the desert which owed much to Lawrence of Arabia, was not favoured by the pragmatic Egyptians who instead assembled an elite formation, drawn from the best of the Egyptian Army and REAF.

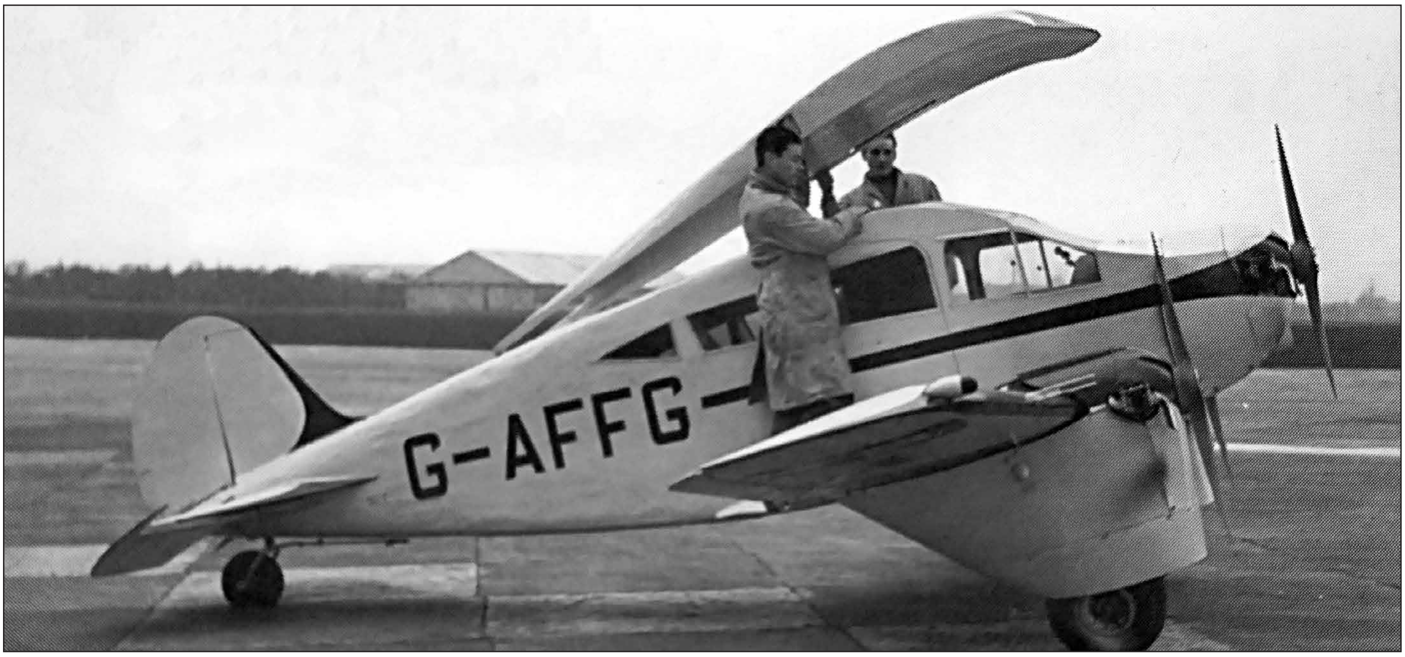
Partly as a result of this policy, limitations on training and equipment, as well as lingering British suspicion, meant that the bulk of the Egyptian Army remained tied down in internal security duties throughout the war. Meanwhile the 1st Light Tank Regiment was, according to British reports during August 1939, the only part of the Egyptian Army which had not improved dramatically over the previous few months. Similarly, the Egyptian Army's 1st Light Car Regiment (mechanised but unarmoured) began the war understrength and virtually untrained.

Egyptian infantry could nevertheless cooperate effectively with British forces in basic manoeuvres. Of these, the 1st Brigade was stationed in Cairo, the 2nd at al-Miaks and the 3rd in the fortress of Manqabad in Upper Egypt. This latter was still considered the best in the Egyptian Army and would soon be commanded by the overweight but capable *Liwa* Sayf Bey. The 4th and 5th Egyptian Infantry Battalions formed part of the Suez Canal garrisons at the start of the war, being supported by their own artillery plus anti-aircraft batteries at Suez and Port Said as well as No. 2 Squadron REAF's Gloster Gladiators based at Suez. In September 1939 the Egyptian Army also included two Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiments, one mobile Light Anti-Aircraft and two Searchlight Regiments. They were of particular importance to the British Army in Egypt which was clearly short of such units.

During August 1939, British and Egyptian units moved to their agreed positions, yet beneath the surface tension remained. Following the Anglo–Egyptian Treaty of 1936, Egypt was no longer under British occupation but everyone knew where power lay. Furthermore, most Egyptians would have preferred their country to stay out of what was regarded as somebody else's war. Educated Egyptians, including many junior officers, focussed their loyalty solely upon Egypt and its young King Faruq. Strains could also be seen in the Egyptian government where the Minister of Defence in 1939 was Salih Harb Pasha, the ex-Director of the Egyptian Coastguard Service, who as a younger man had deserted to join the Libyan Sanussi during the First World War.

On the other hand, the approach of war encouraged several capable officers back into the Egyptian Army, including Prince Isma'il Da'ud. Meanwhile, the Egyptian Chief of Staff, Abd al-Aziz al-Masri maintained his unfortunate habit of comparing the British Army unfavourably with that of Germany. General al-Masri had joined Prime Minister Ali Mahir Pasha of the Sa'adist Party in forming a secret society of nationalist army officers called 'The Ring of Iron' – a fact known to British intelligence services. It is, however, almost certainly wrong to dismiss the appeal of this Ring of Iron as stemming from a supposed promise of promotions and patronage, as some British historians claim. The majority of those who joined did so for reasons of patriotic enthusiasm; one of the young officers in question apparently being Anwar Sadat.

Within days of the outbreak of the Second World War, the all-Egyptian South-West Force moved to its pre-prepared wartime positions in Bahariya and Siwa Oases. Far away in England, Kamil Eloui Bey the managing director of Misr Airwork finally obtained his private pilot's licence from the Royal Aero Club of Great Britain on 5 September 1939, having learned to fly at the London Air Park Flying Club at Hanworth.

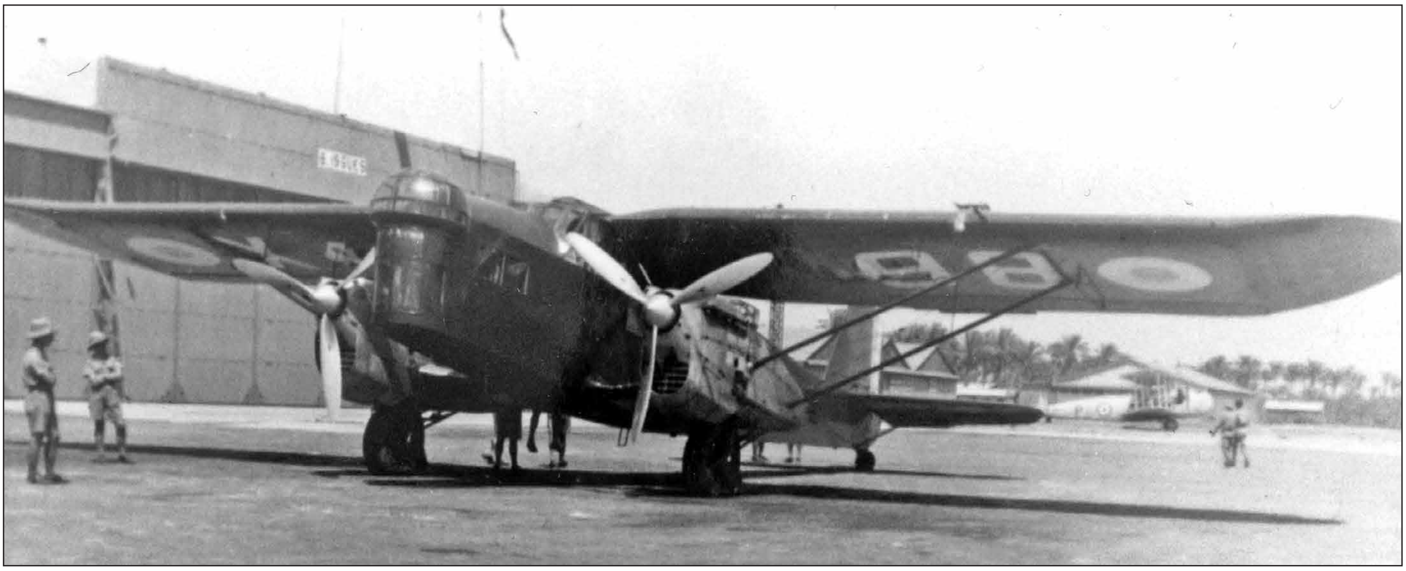


Salih Hilmy's Aerogypt Mk. I "Safety Plane" with the high lift aerofoil and air-brake on top of fuselage in a raised position. This aeroplane had first flown in England in 1938, but Egyptian engineer Salih Hilmy (Saleh Helmy) continued to make improvements and modifications during the war years. (Egyptian Aero Club)

The relatively new Egyptian government of Ali Mahir Pasha wanted to free the two-thirds of the Egyptian Army currently tied down in point defence for more active work by creating an equal number of auxiliary troops. This the British did not support, as they feared the cost and did not see the need. Nevertheless, an Egyptian Territorial Army was established during September 1939, under the command of Abd al-Rahman Azzam Bey. Enthusiasm was one thing, effectiveness quite another and by November the British had still not provided the Egyptian Army with suitable wireless equipment. In December 1939 the Army needed 380 lorries and stated a preference for American Fords, but these would have to be purchased using US dollars, so the British urged Egypt to buy British vehicles. Also in December, Egyptian Army manoeuvres designed to test the defences around Marsa Matruh showed that they would be unable to do this without the assistance of more British advisors. Indeed, the only units capable of carrying out their tasks unaided were the anti-aircraft guns and searchlights.

In fact, the Eleventh Report on the Egyptian Army (these now being made more frequently), which was drawn up by the Advisory Mission in December 1939, was less optimistic than the previous one. It complained that the Egyptian government let the British do most of the work on static defences, that the new Minister of War was not as effective as Sirry Pasha had been, though they had hoped he would be better, and that General Aziz al-Masri was out of touch with modern military ideas. Furthermore, the Egyptians were having difficulty maintaining modern equipment without British supervision. As an example, the entire Egyptian Army Service Corps was needed to maintain the 400 vehicles of the South-Western Force at Bahariya. By the end of 1939 the force at Bahariya had risen to 2,000 men and 500 vehicles and was keen to fight the Italians in Libya 'as soon as possible'.

Clearly the Egyptian Army had been expanded too quickly and its limited pool of technically-trained NCOs and officers was stretched to breaking point. On the other hand, the anti-aircraft, searchlight



This photographs of a French *Armée de 'Air* Potez 542 is said to have been taken in North Africa. However, the presence of a British Vickers transport in the background makes Iraq or perhaps India more likely, suggesting that the machine was in transit to French Indochina from Europe or North Africa. (Albert Grandolini collection) and coastal defences continued to improve. An Egyptian military mission to Turkey, which the British had always opposed, had 'not done much harm' but the British still feared that a new Territorial Army could become Prime Minister Ali Mahir's personal corps of 'blue shirts'. Indeed, the British Embassy in Cairo warned the Foreign Office in London that Ali Mahir's government increasingly saw the Army as a 'tool of internal politics'.

The Egyptian Frontier Force had by now been incorporated into the regular army but remained an elite volunteer unit, better paid and more efficient than any other part of the Army. While the Egyptian government had yet to provide much in the way of additional finances, the entirely Egyptian South-Western Force was progressing well and was regarded as an example of what could be achieved in cooperation with the British Army. Its first commander, whom the British had regarded as inefficient, was replaced by the keen if rotund Prince Isma'il Da'ud.

This Force now consisted of an HQ Cavalry Brigade, a squadron from the Light Tank Regiment, one machine gun company, a Light Car Regiment (less one squadron), one light artillery battery with 3.7-inch howitzers, an anti-tank battery, and a section of field engineers. It was still supported by one Flight of REAF Lysanders. The 1st Light Car Squadron of the Egyptian Frontier Force at Siwa had been reinforced by a Regimental HQ and another Frontier Force squadron, all under the command of a Cavalry Brigadier. Having moved into position at the start of September in anticipation of Italy immediately declaring war – which it did not – the force largely returned to its base areas by the end of the year, leaving only the reinforced units close to the frontier at Siwa plus a maintenance unit at Bahariya.

No shot had yet been fired in anger, but the operation served as a useful logistical and training exercise which raised the confidence of Egypt's armed forces. Meanwhile the headquarters of the Air Observation System near Alexandria had been handed over to a special unit of the Egyptian Army. According to a British document, the Egyptian-manned Air Observation system watched the Libyan frontier from the coast at Sollum southward to 'Wishka' (an unidentified frontier outpost south of Bir al-Shaqqa), while the Frontier Force at Siwa patrolled from 'Wishka' to Milfa which lay next to the frontier just inside Egyptian territory south-west of Siwa Oasis. Three years earlier a patrol of Egyptian Camel Corps had captured a small unit of Italian soldiers at Milfa, then handed them over to the British who interrogated the Italians before releasing them. Now, with the focus on the frontier with Italian-ruled Libya, the role of the Egyptian Army in patrolling the Red Sea coasts, including those of the Sinai Peninsula, tended to be overlooked but remained vital when the presence of the Italian Navy and Air Force in Eritrea posed a threat.

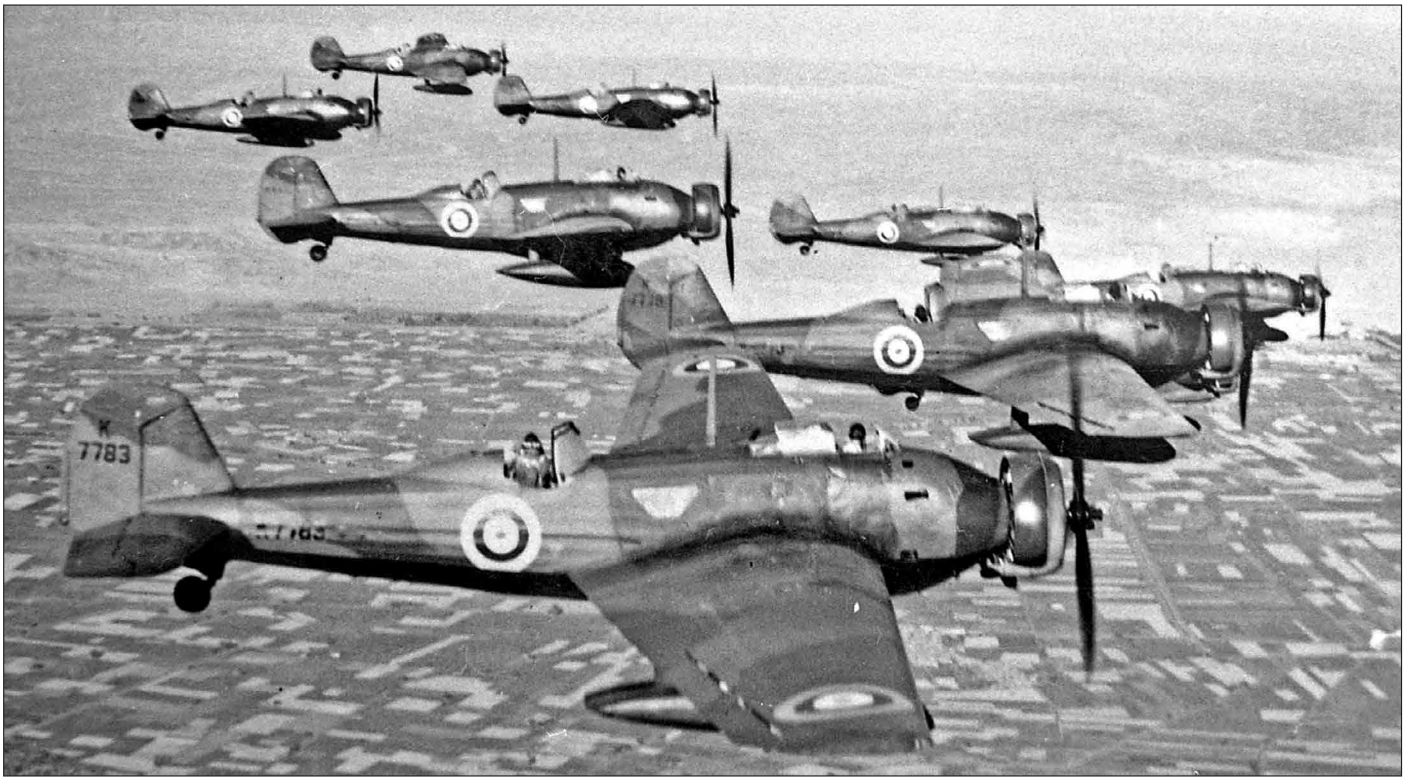
The nature of the ground would be a major factor in the forthcoming North African campaign. Here in Egypt's Western Desert the area along the coast formed an elongated triangle of open desert and semi-desert with a generally hard surface, stretching from Alexandria to Sollum and Siwa. South of this open triangle was the Qatara Depression consisting of salt flats which could collapse into wet soft ground beneath, most of it lying below sea-level. The Qattara Depression was an impassable no-go area for modern armies and even for men riding animals.

South of Siwa lay the Great Sand Sea which was again effectively impassable for armies. However, to the south-east of Siwa the open desert was described as 'relatively good going' as far as the oases of Bahariya and Farafra, to the north-east of which was further open ground as far as Cairo. Siwa and Bahariya could therefore be regarded as gateways at the western and eastern ends of a desert pass, usable by small, modern, mechanised forces. The only real limitation was a lack of watering places between the two main oases. West of Siwa there was again open and passable ground as far at Jaghbub Oasis, inside Italian-ruled Libya. It was this desert pass that the Egyptian Army's South-Western Force was to defend throughout the North African campaign. Similarly open and passible, though even more waterless, terrain existed south of the Great Sand Sea. This the British and Egyptians feared might be crossed by small mechanised Italian Army raiding forces operating from Kufra towards the Egyptian oases of Kharga and Dakhla, and beyond them to the Nile Valley.

A flight of Westland Lysanders from No. 208 Squadron RAF over the Suez Canal, probably in 1939. This British unit had operated alongside its Egyptian colleagues for several years. It was the first RAF unit in the Middle East to receive Lysanders and had converted to its new aeroplanes alongside No. 1 Squadron REAF at Almaza. (Albert Grandolini collection)

The British thought highly of Isma'il Da'ud, who had taught Prince Abbas Halim's daughter to ride a horse during the closing years of the Great War. Despite his habit of undertaking tours of inspection to the Egyptian Army's South-Western Mobile Force with a large collection of musical records, a tent that seemed to come from an Arabian Nights theatre-set and a tendency to lay on desert banquets which had similarly stepped from the pages of an oriental romance, Prince Isma'il Da'ud proved highly competent. Nevertheless, his posting to the Mobile Force was regarded in Egyptian palace circles as a punishment resulting from King Faruq disliking his cousin the Prince's outspokenly pro-British sympathies. King Faruq may also have been behind false accusations of homosexual activities later levelled at Isma'il Da'ud.

The enemy whom Prince Isma'il Da'ud and his men expected to face were motorised Italian 'Auto Saharan Companies', though in reality these had been designed to operate around the oases of Libya rather than in the deep desert. The vast and inhospitable regions which were the South-Western Force's responsibility had



A formation of Vickers Wellesley bombers of No. 45 Squadron RAF over the outskirts of Cairo. The division between the irrigated, cultivated area and the desert beyond is very obvious in this photograph. (Author's collection)

also been studied by Lieutenant General William Gott, a British advocate of the indirect approach, who considered the possibility of an attack on Italian-held Libya though this territory. Gott held high command in the British Army during the early phases of the North African campaign and would be appointed as General Auchinleck's successor in August 1942 but was killed before he could take up the post. Instead, Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery took over.

William Gott's strategic idea of using areas south of the Qattara Depression came to nothing, perhaps because the smooth desert floor tended to break up if used by too many vehicles. Following their own deep desert campaigns to occupy southern Libya in the 1920s and early 1930s, the Italians apparently came to the same conclusion. Consequently, Prince Isma'il Da'ud's Egyptian Force would fight only isolated skirmishes.

In January 1940, the British expressed their opposition to any further plans for Egyptian Army expansion until current plans had been achieved. This they justified by pointing to the small numbers and inadequacy of the Egyptians' administrative units. However, the new Egyptian Defence Minister, Salih al-Harb Pasha, with his background in the Coastguard and in frontier patrol work, considered himself an expert in desert warfare, encouraging improvements in the already elite Frontier Forces as well as in the Egyptian Army's limited artillery and armoured units. He thus drew up new plans to be put into operation in April 1940.

In February 1939, the Twelfth Report by the British Advisory Mission had noted that General Aziz al-Masri was no longer the Egyptian Chief of Staff – which the British regarded as a good thing – but also recorded that his removal had been done in a tactless manner which upset al-Masri and his supporters. On the other hand, the British believed that the latter tended to be found in the Royal Palace rather than within the Egyptian officer corps. In reality, more upset and damage was done by al-Masri's abrupt dismissal than British military advisors realised.

Aziz al-Masri also managed to annoy some influential people within the Egyptian government, notably by his argument that Egypt did not need a navy because its coast was defended by artillery and that the latter were currently being upgraded. As an ex-Ottoman Army officer, General al-Masri may have been influenced by the defeat inflicted upon the British and French navies when they tried to force the Dardanelles in 1915. Also, a recent coastal defence exercise in which Alexandria had been 'attacked' by 'enemy' Motor Torpedo Boats, had been considered a success for the coastal defences. Though General Aziz al-Masri ceased to work as the Chief of Staff, his position was not immediately filled by anyone else. Not until August 1940 could the British Advisory Mission state with certainty that al-Masri had gone, and that the new Egyptian Chief of Staff was Ibrahim Attalah Pasha.

In the meantime, the British Advisory Mission recorded good progress, notably in air defence as demonstrated by a joint exercise with the British in the Delta region in December 1939. By April 1940, Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries and associated searchlights were either in position at, or had positions prepared at, Alexandria, Cairo, Almaza, Abu Qir, Daba'a, Aswan, Zifta, Suez, Binha, Kafr al-Zayat and the Muhammad Ali Barrage and irrigation control hub just north of Cairo. For their part, the British made clear in March that they were still keen to offer staff courses for selected Egyptian Army officers and in April 1940, Brigadier Sayf Bey of the 3rd Infantry Brigade was given command of a mixed British and Egyptian Brigade. However, the Egyptian government wanted to release most of its army for field operations while handing over point defence to the Territorial Force being recruited by the fiercely nationalistic Abd al-Rahman Azzam Bey. Deeply suspicious of Azzam Bey and his still small Territorial Army, the British were against this, perhaps still being aware of the limitations of Egyptian Army training. As a result, Egyptian infantry continued to garrison Cairo, Alexandria, Aswan, Assyut and Daba'a. Also in April, the Thirteenth Monthly Report by the British Advisory Mission offered an assessment of the preparedness of various parts of the Egyptian Army:

Frontiers Force fit to protect and patrol the frontier.

Coastal Defence fit but signals weak.

Anti-aircraft fit but lights only 70 percent complete: In Alexandria the anti-aircraft brigade had two 3-inch AA batteries, and two searchlight regiments with 24 searchlights. In Cairo were two anti-aircraft regiments with one 3.7-inch battery, two 3-inch batteries, and a searchlight detachment with 16 searchlights. In Suez an anti-aircraft detachment had two Bofors batteries, one 3.7-inch battery and 6 searchlights.

Mobile Force (South-Western Force) fit for limited operations. Those elements based at Marsa Matruh still consisted of a light car regiment, a light tank squadron, a light (3.7-inch) howitzer battery, an anti-tank battery, and a machine gun company. These [the] British had wanted to operate under the British Army's 7th Armoured Division.

Matruh garrison fit for static defence.

Cavalry fit for internal security.

Artillery fit for mobile operations.

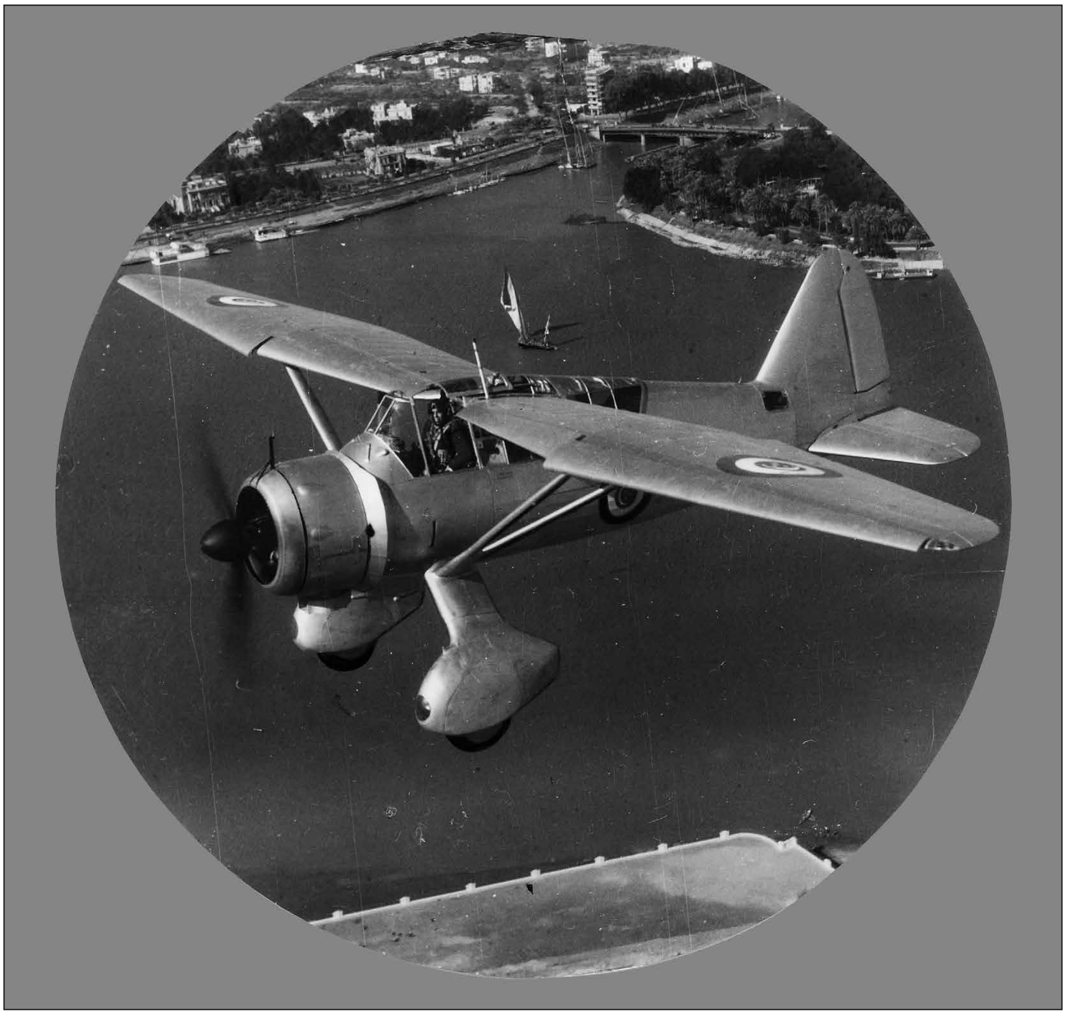
Engineers fit for limited static work.

Infantry, 3rd Brigade fit for static defence, reserve infantry fit for static anti-sabotage duties (had no trucks).

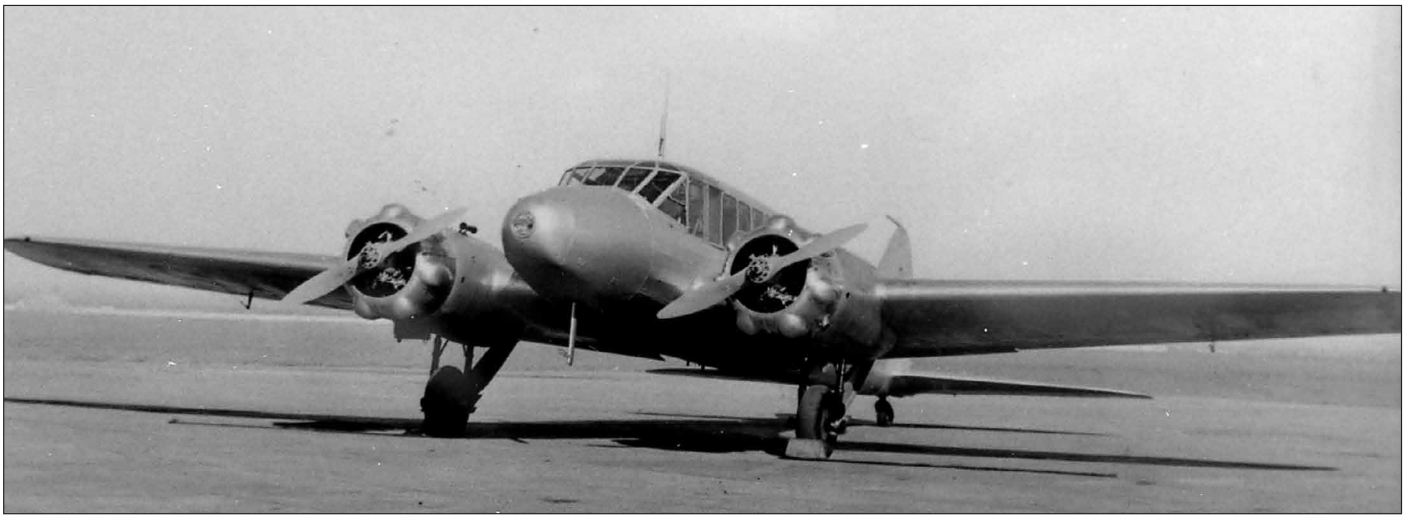
Egyptian troops in the Western Desert were normally supplied through the same channels as British troops. The report therefore declared that the main role of the Egyptian Army must be limited to frontiers work, anti-aircraft and coastal defence particularly the defence of Marsa Matruh, while the small mobile force should only operate within a limited radius. Attitudes within the Egyptian Army were said to be now much more positive towards the British. On the other hand, the British military authorities wanted changes to the agreed defence plans, notably that the South-Western Mobile Force should operate in closer conjunction with the British north of the Qattara Depression rather than operating from Bahariya. The British advisors also believed that money currently being spent on a Territorial Force would be better spent on the existing Egyptian Army and the REAF. On 12 May 1940 all retired Egyptian officers were recalled to the colours because the army had now expanded to approximately 5,000 men.

Italy entered the Second World War on 10 June 1940 and from that moment the situation changed. The months of Phoney War from September 1939 to May 1940 had been even more 'phoney' in Egypt than they had been in the United Kingdom and France. Somewhat to the surprise of many British observers, the outbreak of real war with Italy was received with general enthusiasm by the Egyptian officer corps, many of whom wanted to promptly invade Libya. Indeed, there were requests that Egypt go on the offensive to retake Jaghbub which had

The father of who the REAF's best known pilots from the 1940s and early 1950s, Muhammad Zaki Kamal Pasha of the Egyptian Royal Guard in full ceremonial unform shortly before his retirement. His uniform and medals are now displayed in the Military Museum in Cairo's historic Citadel. (Fuad Kamal archive)



A classic air-to-air photograph of a REAF aeroplane over the Nile in Cairo; this time showing one of the new Mk. I Westland Lysanders with a substantial sand-filter beneath the engine. (EAF Museum collection)



The REAF's solitary Avro 652A, here photographed before delivery to Egypt, was developed from the Avro 652 short-haul airliner and differed from the Avro Anson Mk. 1 in several respects. It had the Egyptian civil registration SU-AAO before being given Egyptian national markings and the military serial number W204. (EAF Museum collection)

been handed over to the Italians under British pressure almost two decades earlier.

With a somewhat greater sense of military reality, the Egyptian government took British advice and merely broke off diplomatic relations with Italy. Prime Minister Ali Mahir declared that Egypt would not declare war unless invaded or bombed by Italian forces. In fact, the British were content with this rather hazy state of affairs as it left them to fight what became almost a private war against the Italians and subsequently the Germans in the Western Desert. Meanwhile the Egyptian government, remembering the great losses suffered by the Egyptian Labour Corps and related formations outside Egypt during the First World War, would only allow uniformed Egyptian labour units to be raised for use within the country. Their work would prove vital for the operation of Egyptian ports and railways in supported of the Allied war effort.

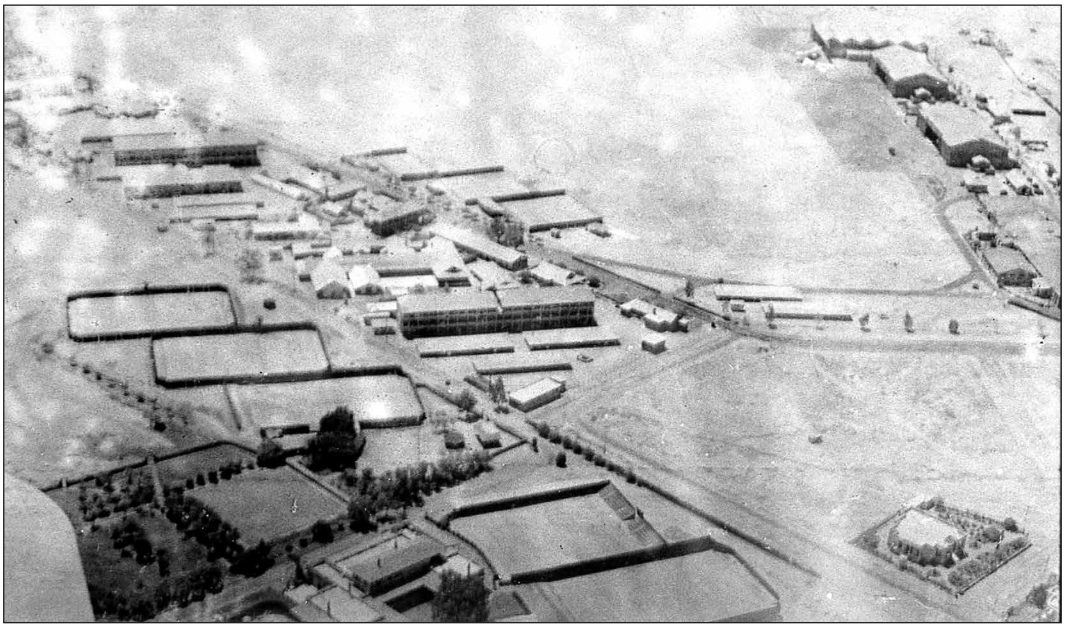
Within days of the Italian entry into the war, Egyptian air defence positions were in action and were soon suffering casualties. British reports noted with approval how several batteries continued firing even after being hit. The Egyptian Army similarly manned coastal defence batteries in Marsa Matruh, the Alexandria naval base and elsewhere; their task being to fend off raids by Italian Motor Torpedo Boats. Meanwhile the most exposed Egyptian positions were those in the Western Desert, south of the main battlefields and largely manned by elite Frontier Forces. Here the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Reconnaissance Squadrons were equipped with Bren Gun Carriers, plus the Egyptian Camel Corps which now travelled by lorry and formed a 5th Squadron. These troops maintained an air observation line deep in the Western Desert which proved highly effective and had been established with minimal British assistance.

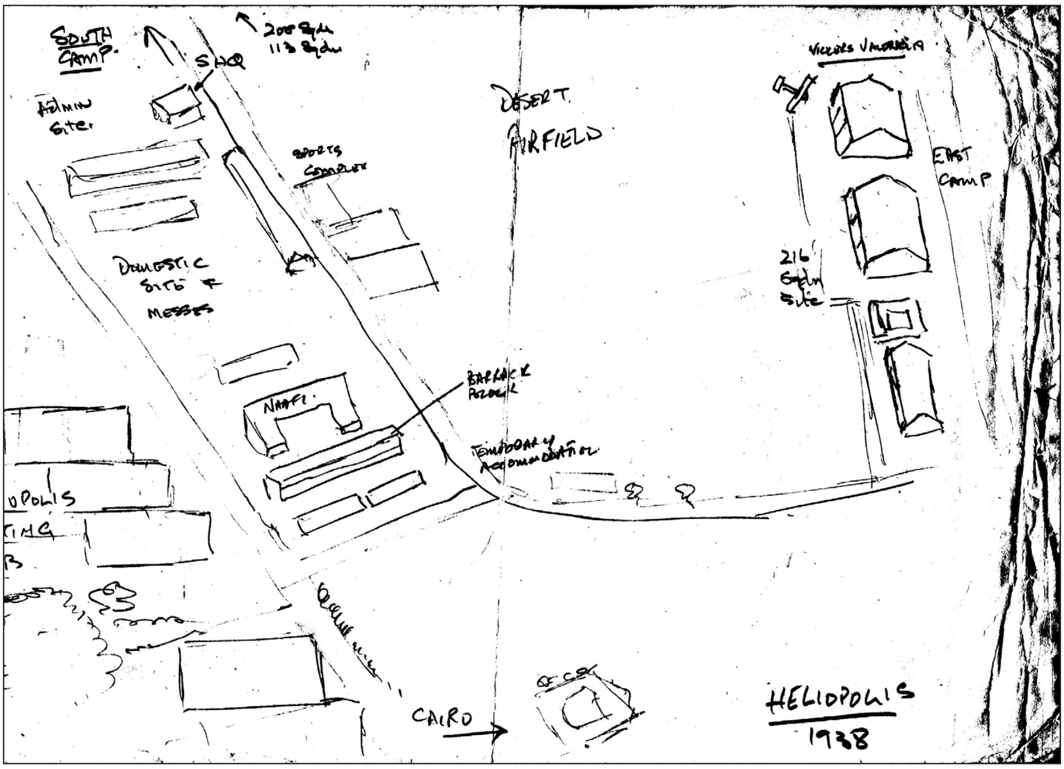
Four newly trained companies of the Egyptian Army's Arab Legion were also based at Marsa Matruh, Sidi Barrani, Siwa and Bahariya, while a company of engineers continued their work on the Marsa Matruh defences. Though they endured regular bombing raids, these men were still regarded by the British as suitable only for static defence. The varied units would also be organisationally incorporated into the British Western Desert Force, itself to be restructured as the Eighth Army in September 1941. Meanwhile Siwa remained the only purely Egyptian command, as it would for many months, and was currently under an officer from the Egyptian Staff College who had studied at Camberley in England and whom the British held in high regard.

Despite these positive aspects, there remained problems, some as a result of effective Italian propaganda. For example, rumours were rife that the British wanted to disarm the entire Egyptian Army because it was not trusted. There was undoubtedly a strain on morale, except in the Coastal Defence units, the Frontier Force, searchlights and anti-aircraft batteries which performed satisfactorily under fire. Casualties from Italian bombing were at first higher than need be, but Egyptian senior officers learned quickly and losses were rapidly reduced. While some senior men were accused of seeking safety in the Nile Valley, junior officers and ordinary soldiers showed up well. Nevertheless, the British opinion that Egyptian infantry were unlikely to withstand a serious attack by Italian forces remained unchanged.

After Italy entered the war, one Light Car Regiment plus one squadron at Sollum remained responsible for patrolling the

The Passing Out parade by newly qualified REAF personnel at Almaza aerodrome on 2nd June 1939. (EAF Museum)


The southern part of Heliopolis aerodrome photographed from the air in 1938 when it was still RAF base. (Author's collection)



A sketch by an unnamed British airman identifying various features in the aerial photograph of Heliopolis aerodrome. (Author's collection)

entire frontier as far as Siwa Oasis, normally having two squadrons manning posts along the frontier with other units held in reserve at Siwa. However, an Italian air raid immediately after Italy declared war on the United Kingdom hit both the Siwa squadron headquarters and the reserves at Sollum, causing damage and casualties. In response, a shaken Egyptian government considered withdrawing these exposed troops but the Egyptian Army objected and so the idea was largely dropped. Nevertheless, the defence of Sollum was handed over to British personnel. Meanwhile, the Egyptian defenders of Siwa were strengthened by four Mark II Medium Tanks loaned by the British Army. Their Egyptian crews were trained by the British 7th Armoured Division, while their frontier patrol area went as far north as al-Shaqqa.

The Egyptian Air Observation positions were now fully functioning, manned by a mixture of Frontier Force, Army, Coastguard and civilian police. The strength of the Egyptian Coastguard Service was similarly increasing, soon reaching 98 officers and 3,092 men. Egyptian air defence units at Marsa Matruh had been strengthened and Prince Isma'il Da'ud's Mobile Force, as it was now generally called, worked increasingly closely with the British. Its headquarters were now at al-Qasaba, 32 kilometres south-east of Marsa Matruh but still outside direct British military command. Thus, effective cooperation between the Prince's Egyptian Mobile Force and the British Army depended upon the goodwill of officers involved.

Rumours that the British wanted to disarm the Egyptian Army seemed to be about to be proved correct when, in July 1940, the senior command of the British Army in the Middle East requested that all Egyptian troops in the Western Desert, with the exception of Frontier Forces in the deep desert, be withdrawn and their equipment handed over to the British. Egyptians – military and civilian alike – were appalled and a shockwave of indignation ran through the junior ranks of the Egyptian officer corps. Indeed, its reverberations would last for decades. Fortunately, the British government in London proved more sensitive than senior British officers in the Middle East, and realising that such a move would cause a political storm, they promptly quashed the idea. Nevertheless, as increasingly exaggerated rumours about the British request spread, some Egyptian officers at Marsa Matruh seriously considered armed resistance if the British attempted to disarm them. Coming on top of the forced removal of General Aziz al-Masri as Chief of Staff, this whole episode made some previously un-political officers increasingly anti-British.

In the event, only the Egyptian Army garrison at Marsa Matruh was withdrawn to Daba'a, the units closest to the frontier at Sidi Barrani and Sollum having already been pulled back in the face of the Italian invasion. During August and September 1940, Egyptian units were integrated in the overall, predominantly British defence system across the Western Desert, including the anti-aircraft batteries at Marsa Matruh and Alexandria, along with Egyptian Army units guarding vulnerable spots in the Nile Delta. Egyptian anti-aircraft and searchlight batteries had proved very effective, bringing down several enemy aircraft and capturing one of their crews. Meanwhile the Frontier Forces also captured an Italian lorry with a warrant officer and corporal following a small-scale Italian attack on one of the Frontier Force's outposts. Or perhaps the Italian unit in question had merely got lost and had blundered into the Egyptians by mistake.

For Egypt, the hero of the hour was Corporal Hassan, a Sudanese soldier in the Egyptian Frontier Force who shot down an enemy aeroplane with what he admitted to be a fluke shot, and then went on to capture the pilot. Hassan became the talk of Cairo and his feat is still celebrated in the Egyptian Hall of El Alamein War Museum. Elsewhere, several Egyptian soldiers who would rise to prominence during the struggle against Israel in the 1960s and 1970s first saw action during this period. One such was Field Marshal Muhammad Ali Fahmi, the commander of Egyptian Air Defences from September 1968 to January 1975, who, as a newly commissioned officer, served in a battery which downed a German Junkers Ju 88.

On 21 August 1940, the Egyptian Parliament unanimously declared that Egypt would defend itself if attacked, but when Sa'adist Party members in the government proposed a declaration of war on the Axis powers they were voted down and so resigned. Instead, the cabinet proposed an increase of 5,000 men in the armed forces. Thereafter the Egyptian administrative machine, corporate bodies, individuals and of course the army continued to assist the Allies, while politicians remained officially neutral. Unfortunately, this lack of a clearly defined policy had the effect of hampering day to day cooperation between the Egyptian and British armed forces.

Report Number 15 on the Egyptian Army, drawn up by the British Advisory Mission in October 1940, largely repeated information presented earlier. It noted that, despite the near scandal caused by the suggestion that Egyptian troops in the Western Desert hand over their equipment, the Egyptian garrison of Marsa Matruh had left its reserves of ammunition, searchlights and heavier 'fixed position' artillery behind when it was replaced by British and Imperial troops in September. This was, however, done with the agreement of all sides. The Egyptian troops are then understood to have moved to Daba'a, thus releasing British troops previously garrisoning this location.

Following the Italian invasion of Egypt in September 1940, most of Prince Isma'il Da'ud's Mobile Force, which had been concentrated at al-Qasaba south-east of Marsa Matruh to support the exposed Egyptian garrison at Siwa, moved to Qarat al-Markaz almost 100 kilometres south of Matruh. This location was intended to be more convenient for supporting Siwa along a traditional desert track which followed the north-western escarpment of the Qattara Depression. Unfortunately, this track rapidly broke up under increased motorised traffic so Prince Isma'il Da'ud pulled his main base back to al-Qasaba, while his men searched for a new supply route between the coast and Siwa Oasis.

Though the Siwa Garrison and the Frontier Force patrols were not under direct British control, they were reinforced by one British motorised battalion. Quite who this unit was answerable to remains unclear. Nevertheless, in October the Egyptian Minister of Defence made clear to the Egyptian garrison in Siwa that they should resist if attacked by Italian troops. Currently, the greatest danger to the Frontier Forces came from enemy air attack – one raid on 25 September 1940 dropping 90 bombs – though only two soldiers were wounded. On the other hand, the British retreat in the face of the initial Italian advance (9–16 September) left the Egyptian Air Observation Post at Bir al-Shaqqa very exposed, so the line of outposts was altered to run from Bagura south of Sidi Barrani to 'Wishka', then south along the frontier to Williams Pass, approximately 10 kilometres from the frontier, south-east of Jaghbub Oasis in Libya.

The pilots of one of the REAF's two Gloster Gladiator squadrons on in front of their aircraft, published in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* on 6 December 1939. The man on the far right appears to be Flight Lieutenant Hassan Mahmud, the CO of No. 2 Squadron at this time. (EAF Museum)

The observer-gunner of an Egyptian Hawker Audax, almost certainly of No. 4 (Bomber) Squadron, published in the newspaper *Al-Ahram* on 6 December 1939 when the Egyptian press was closely following the activities of the Egyptian Air Force. However, 12 of No. 4's Audaxes had already been transferred to the REAF's FTS to be used as advanced training machines in the expectation of their replacement by Bristol Blenheims which, in fact, never arrived. (EAF Museum, Cairo)

Far away, on the frontier between Egypt and Sudan, Egyptian Army garrisons at Aswan and Wadi Halfa which had been under the command of *Qa'im Maqam* (Lieutenant Colonel) Abd al-Rahman Fahmi since 5 October 1940, had been provided with additional weaponry. These units also cooperated with the Frontier Force Light Car Squadron at Kharga Oasis and al-Shibb (al-Shab) in a military exercise on 5 October. Lying about 35 kilometres from the Sudanese

One of the REAF's Avro 626s being serviced by Egyptian personnel under the supervision of the British Advisory Mission, probably in 1938 or 1939. (Author's collection)

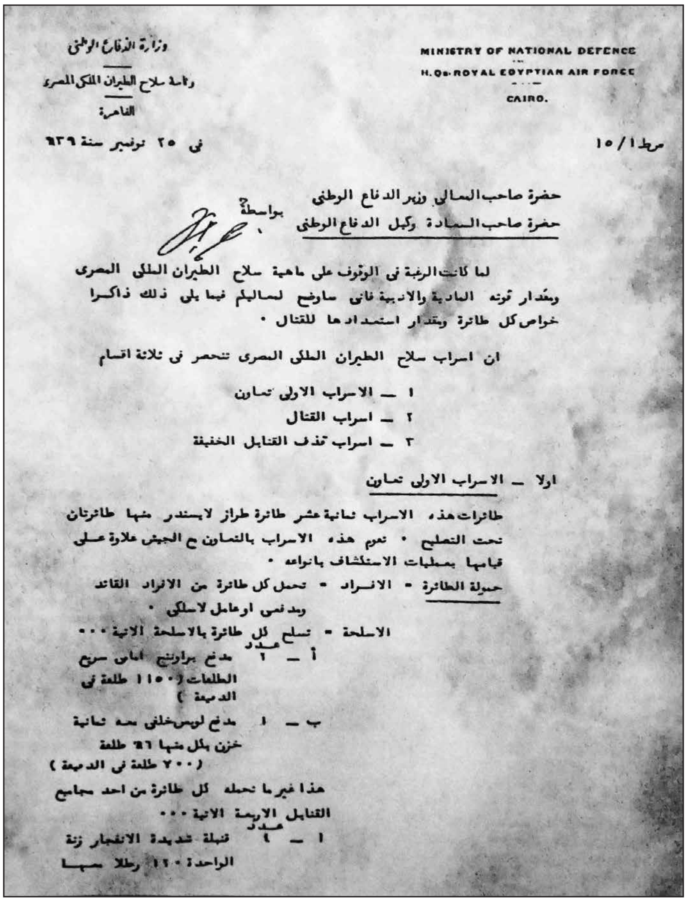
frontier, al-Shibb was no more than a well on the famous Darb al-Arba'in or 'Road of Forty Days' whose line of bleached camel bones had linked southern Egypt to northern Sudan since medieval times. In this distant corner of Egypt, a vast open area with completely undefended and barely marked frontiers was still thought vulnerable to an Italian raid.

Persistent Italian air raids against the large and strategically vital Royal Navy facilities in Alexandria focussed on the harbour during November 1940. Here, searchlights were manned by Egyptian troops while anti-aircraft guns included Egyptian, British and Maltese batteries; their work coordinated by British liaison officers. In fact, most Egyptian military losses during this period were suffered by air defence units around Alexandria, and at the end of 1940 a conservative estimate of Egyptian casualties was put at 201 soldiers and 1,278 civilians. Meanwhile Egyptian Army Engineers played a leading role in the country's two bomb disposal squads based in Cairo and Alexandria. Other targets considered vulnerable to air attack were Cairo, the Port Said oil refinery and the Suez Canal facilities.

After the initial Italian invasion was driven out of Egypt in January 1941, the British government considered urging Egypt to enter the war as an official belligerent. But British Commanders in Chief in the Middle East and Mediterranean theatres advised against such a move, stating that it was better to leave Egypt an officially neutral country – at least until the Egyptian government itself expressed a wish to declare war. The resulting prolonged period of nominal neutrality meant that the Egyptian Army's Mobile Force was not placed under direct British command. This in turn may be why Prince Isma'il Da'ud's men hardly ever appear in histories of the Second World War. With the defeat of the Italian invasion, the Prince's Mobile Force returned to its original positions where it eventually included an Ordinance Maintenance Detachment and six Motor Transport Companies from the Egyptian Army Service Corps. Thereafter the Mobile Force remained in and around Bahariya, serving as a forward defence for Cairo in case the Germans or Italians developed anything comparable to the British Long Range Desert Group (LRDG).

In fact, the British LRDG had, from the start, close links with the Sudanese Defence Force and the Egyptian Army. Formed in 1940 by Major Bagnold who had early recognised the danger of Italian

Vickers Wellesley bombers of the British RAF at Hilwan in Egypt, with the so-called "bent pyramid" of Dahshur in the distance. The tall chimneys in the centre were also regarded as a characteristic hazard of Hilwan aerodrome. (Albert Grandolini collection)



وزارة الدفاع الوطني
رئاسة سلاح الطيران الملكي المصري
القاهرة

MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENCE
H. Qs. ROYAL EGYPTIAN AIR FORCE
CAIRO.

مرط ١ / ١٥
في ٢٥ نوفمبر سنة ٩٣٩

حضرة صاحب المعالي وزير الدفاع الوطني
بواسطة
حضرة صاحب السعادة وكيل الدفاع الوطني

لما كانت الرغبة في الوقوف على ماهية سلاح الطيران الملكي المصري ومقدار قوته المادية والادبية فاني ساوضح لمعاليكم فيما يلي ذلك ذاكرا خواص كل طائرة ومقدار استعدادها للقتال •

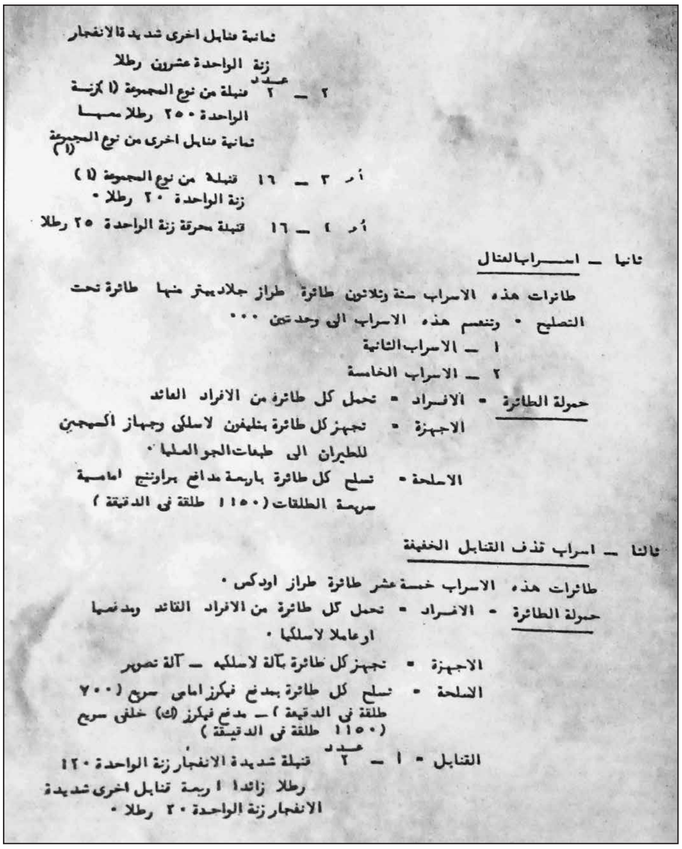
ان اسراب سلاح الطيران الملكي المصري تنحصر في ثلاثة اقسام

١ ــ الاسراب الاولى تعاون
٢ ــ اسراب القتال
٣ ــ اسراب قذف القنابل الخفيفة

اولا ــ الاسراب الاولى تعاون

طائرات هذه الاسراب ثمانية عشر طائرة طراز لايسندر منها طائرتان تحت التصليح • تقوم هذه الاسراب بالتعاون مع الجيش علاوة على قيامها بعمليات الاستكشاف بانواعه •

حمولة الطائرة = الافراد = تحمل كل طائرة من الافراد القائد ومدفعي اوعامل لاسلكي •
الاسلحة = تسلح كل طائرة بالاسلحة الاتية •••
عدد
أ ــ ٢ مدفع براونتج امامي سريع الطلقات (١١٥٠ طلقة في الدقيقة)
ب ــ ١ مدفع لويس خلفي معه ثمانية خزن بكل منها ٩٦ طلقة (٧٠٠ طلقة في الدقيقة)
هذا غير ما تحمله كل طائرة من احد مجاميع القنابل الاربعة الاتية •••
عدد
١ ــ ٤ قنبلة شديدة الانفجار زنة الواحدة ١٢٠ رطلا معها



ثمانية قنابل اخرى شديدة الانفجار
زنة الواحدة عشرون رطلا
عدد
٢ ــ ٢ قنبلة من نوع المجموعة (١) زنة الواحدة ٢٥٠ رطلا معها
ثمانية قنابل اخرى من نوع المجموعة (١)
أو ٣ ــ ١٦ قنبلة من نوع المجموعة (١) زنة الواحدة ٢٠ رطلا •
أو ٤ ــ ١٦ قنبلة محرقة زنة الواحدة ٢٥ رطلا

ثانيا ــ اسراب القتال

طائرات هذه الاسراب ستة وثلاثون طائرة طراز جلاديتر منها طائرة تحت التصليح • وتنقسم هذه الاسراب الى وحدتين •••
١ ــ الاسراب الثانية
٢ ــ الاسراب الخامسة
حمولة الطائرة = الافراد = تحمل كل طائرة من الافراد القائد
الاجهزة = تجهز كل طائرة بتلفون لاسلكي وجهاز الاكسجين للطيران الى طبقات الجو العليا •
الاسلحة = تسلح كل طائرة باربعة مدافع براونتج امامية سريعة الطلقات (١١٥٠ طلقة في الدقيقة)

ثالثا ــ اسراب قذف القنابل الخفيفة

طائرات هذه الاسراب خمسة عشر طائرة طراز اودكس •
حمولة الطائرة = الافراد = تحمل كل طائرة من الافراد القائد ومدفعيا اوعاملا لاسلكيا •
الاجهزة = تجهز كل طائرة بآلة لاسلكيه ــ آلة تصوير
الاسلحة = تسلح كل طائرة بمدفع فيكرز امامي سريع (٧٠٠ طلقة في الدقيقة) ــ مدفع فيكرز (ك) خلفي سريع (١١٥٠ طلقة في الدقيقة)
عدد
القنابل = ١ ــ ٢ قنبلة شديدة الانفجار زنة الواحدة ١٢٠ رطلا زائدا اربعة قنابل اخرى شديدة الانفجار زنة الواحدة ٢٠ رطلا •

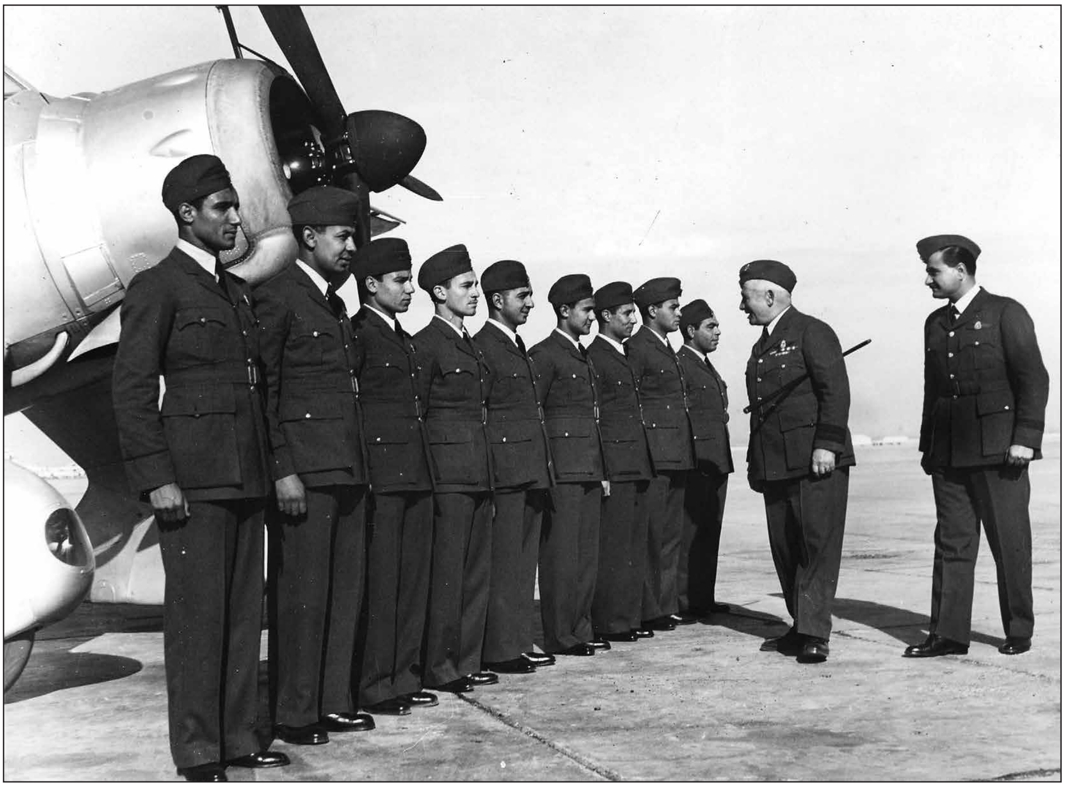
An official letter from the Commanding Officer of the REAF to the Egyptian Minister and Undersecretary of Defence, dated 25 November 1939, outlining the current strength of the REAF and its wartime role. (EAF Museum, Cairo)

A formal photograph of *Tayyar Awwal* (Flying Officer) Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia taken before the Second World War when he was probably in command of No. 5 (Fighter) Squadron. Equipped with Gloster Gladiators, this new unit was still in the process of formation. (Hassan Tewfik collection)

motorised raids on the upper Nile Valley, the LRDG borrowed its first transport from Egyptian troops at Siwa because their lorries were better suited to deep desert work. These were probably the 200 vehicles loaned to the British by the Egyptian Army during this period. The Long Range Desert Group's greatest success came at the time of the initial Italian invasion of Egypt. When the Italians settled down at Sidi Barrani, the threat posed to their flanks and extended lines of supply by the LRDG diverted much needed troops and equipment from the main battle area back to garrisons in Libya. The LRDG is also credited with confirming the Italian Army in its essentially defensive strategy before this became apparent to the British military command in Egypt. Thereafter the LRDG and the new British 'Oasis Force', subsequently based at Kufra in south-eastern Libya, would be busy for the rest of 1941, working closely with the Egyptian Mobile Force.

The defeat of the Italian invasion of Egypt, and the subsequent counter-attacks which seized the north-eastern part of the Italian colony of Libya, may have made the British overconfident. Their military authorities certainly started to have a more relaxed and open attitude towards the Egyptian military, with the British CO in the country even admitting that the Egyptian Territorial Army was 'quite useful'. It should, he suggested, be put under the direct control of the Egyptian Ministry of War. The Egyptian Air Observation Line across the desert also remained, though its positions had to change according to the fluctuating fortunes of war. Thus, as the great battles of 1940 and 1941 raged further north, the Egyptian patrol area and Egyptian Air Observation Line moved back and forth, pivoting around its southern terminal at Siwa.

With the arrival of German troops in February 1941, the LRDG had gone on the defensive for a while. Ralph Alger Bagnold, now a Colonel, was made Military Governor of the Oases but the feared raids by German troops did not materialise because they, unlike the Italians, were wary of operating in the deep desert. So, the Long Range Desert Group returned to the offensive, launching raids from Jalu inside Libyan Cyrenaica against neighbouring enemy-held al-Awjila and other oases in March 1941. For his part, Bagnold would

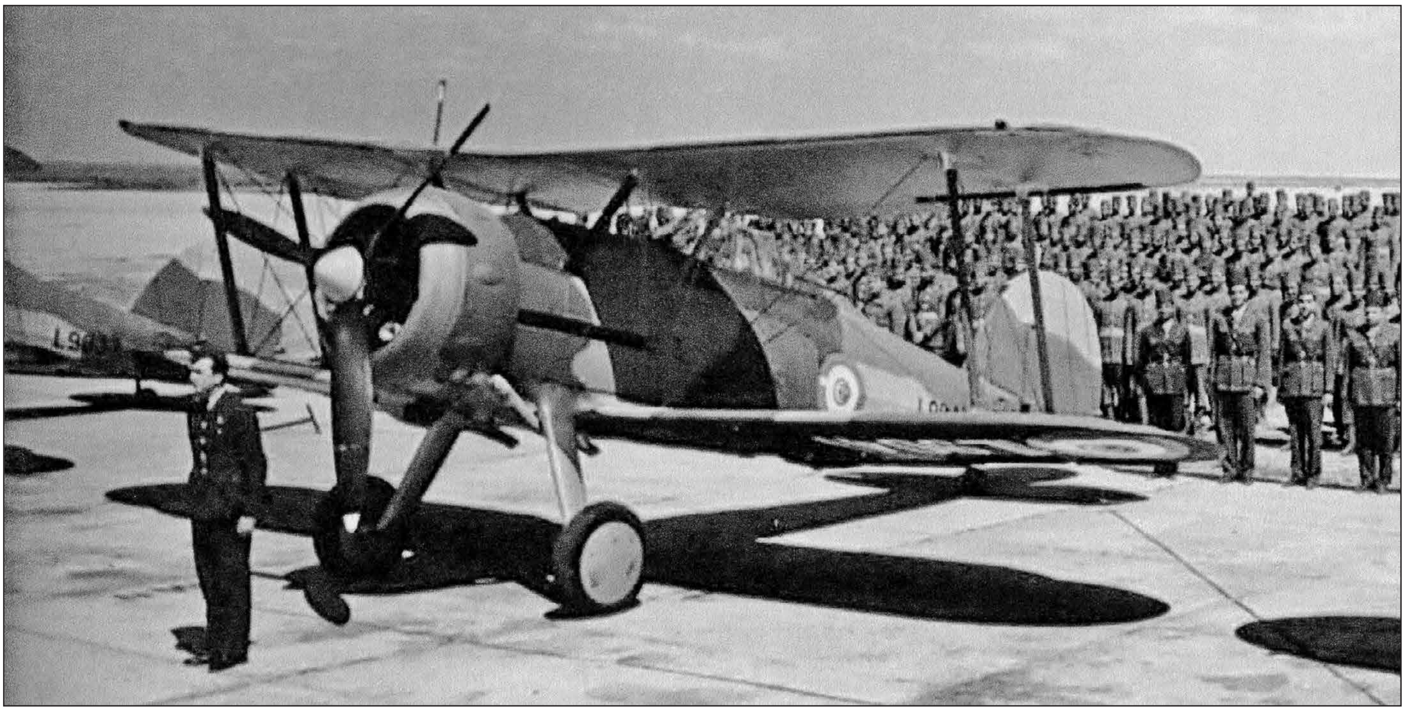


White-haired *Liwa* (Brigadier) Ali Islam Bey, Director of the REAF, inspecting officers of the REAF's No.1 Squadron and their newly arrived Westland Lysanders. Ali Islam would be replaced shortly afterwards by *Liwa* Hasan Abd al-Wahab Pasha. On the right of the line is *Qa'id Sirb* (acting *Qa'id Asrab*, Flight Lieutenant, acting Squadron Leader) Salih Mahmud Salih. (EAF Museum photograph)

soon be based in the comfort of Cairo, advising on long-range operations by both the LRDG and the British 'Oasis Force', a new formation based at Kufra in south-eastern Libya which would be captured in April 1941, as well as in Jaghbub Oasis further north. Behind these 'frontline' oases, the vast desert area of Egypt south of the main battle area continue to be the responsibility of the Egyptian Army and Frontier Forces.

British setbacks in the Western Desert shook the confidence of even the most pro-British elements in the Egyptian officer corps. Furthermore, the necessity to use significant numbers of Egyptian troops in internal security within the Egyptian heartlands of the Nile Delta, Cairo and parts of Upper Egypt was revived, accompanied by renewed fears for the safely of Cairo against overland raids from the Western Desert. After the withdrawal of the Egyptian garrison at Wadi Halfa, the only Egyptian troops in the Sudan were based in the capital Khartoum and in Port Sudan on the Red Sea. Here Egyptian infantry were drawn from the 7th and 3rd Battalions, along with Egyptian coastal artillery at Port Sudan, to which Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries were added at the request of General Platt, commander of the Sudan Defence Force. Platt's fear of an Italian thrust northwards from Eritrea had proved groundless but Port Sudan was bombed by Italian aircraft operating from the same area. Unfortunately, it remains unclear who brought down the Italian fighter which ended up in Port Sudan's central market with a patriotic collection-box.

There was also action in the Red Sea itself, though this did not involve the Egyptians. The Red Sea route to Egypt had, of course, become much more important following the fall of France



The REAF's No. 5 Squadron, equipped with Gloster Gladiators, formally being declared operational. Unlike the Gladiators of No. 2 Squadron, which were already flying regular patrols, those of No. 5 Squadron lacked the REAF's usual green and white tail stripes. The ranks drawn up behind the aeroplanes are believed to be cadets from the Egyptian Army Military College. (EAF Museum collection)

The Governor of Cairo reviewing a very traditional parade by Egyptian Army troops through Cairo during the Second World War. They still include cavalry and members of the Frontier Forces riding camels. (Egyptian Army archive)

and Italy's entry into the Second World War. At that time, the Italian Navy had eight submarines and seven destroyers based at Massawa. The submarine *Galileo Galilai* was captured near Aden after a surface fight with a British aeroplane and HMS *Moonstone* on 19 June 1940. Two others were later sunk (one in the Persian Gulf) while another was wrecked. On 20–21 October 1940, Italian destroyers based in Eritrea attacked British convoy BN7, resulting in one British destroyer damaged and one of the Italian ships driven ashore. However, the remaining four Italian submarines would be recalled to Europe in February 1941 and there was no further offensive action by Italian destroyers in the Red Sea. Nevertheless, these events caused the Allies to group their vital merchant supply ships in convoys.

THE ROYAL EGYPTIAN AIR FORCE

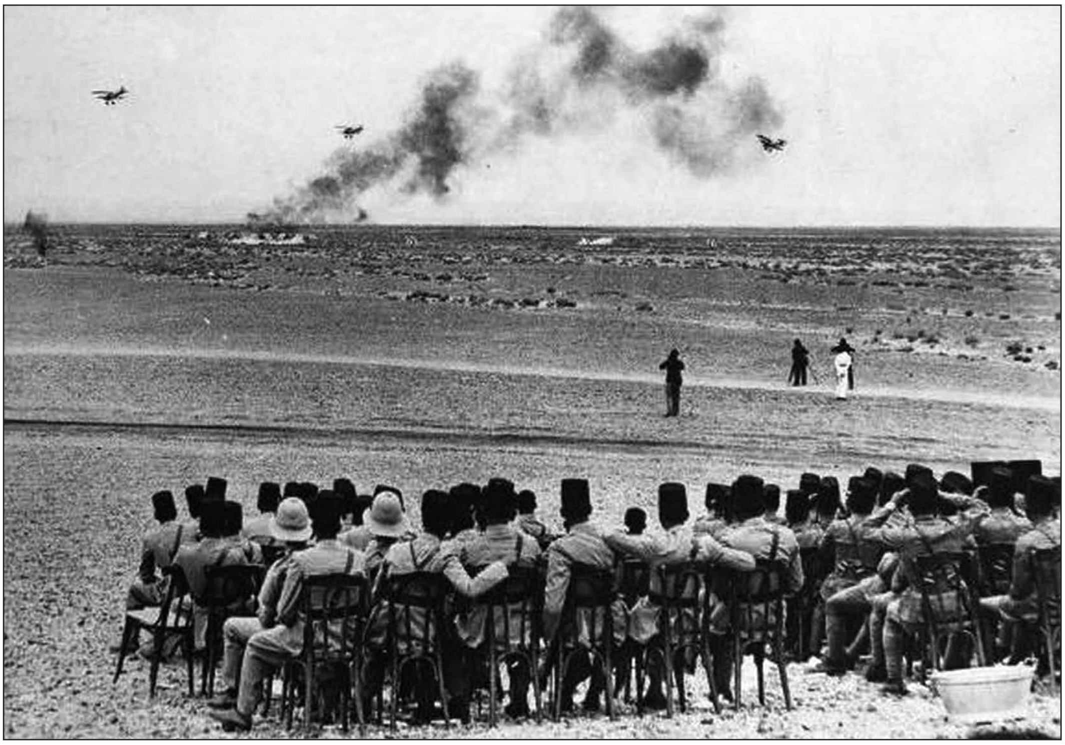
When war broke out in September 1939, most of the REAF was based either at Almaza on the edge of Cairo, or at Suez. There was also a station headquarters at Dakhailah near Alexandria. Meanwhile, the REAF Air Headquarters still formed part of the Egyptian Ministry of War at Abbasiya, one of the older north-eastern suburbs of the Egyptian capital lying between downtown Cairo and Almaza. The current Egyptian government under Prime Minister Ali Mahir, who had recently taken over from Muhammad Mahmud Pasha on 18 August 1939, promptly ordered the Egyptian Army and the REAF to go to their war stations. There were currently only three frontline squadrons, one with a nominal 18 Lysander army cooperation aircraft, one with a nominal 18 Gladiator fighters and one with six old-fashioned 'Egyptian' Audaxes bombers, plus a transport squadron with variety of equipment, and the Flying Training School.

The RAF's position in the area was of course stronger but was still weak in comparison to the threat posed by the *Regia Aeronautica*. An overstretched RAF had, in fact, been one reason why the British government radically changed its attitude towards an expansion of the REAF's capability and encouraged the establishment of a second Egyptian fighter squadron. There were also three RAF fighter squadrons equipped with Gladiators in the area, Nos. 33, 80 and 112, scattered between Egypt, Palestine and the Sudan. However, only one was actually in Egypt when war broke out – fortunately in Europe not in North Africa or the Middle East where Italy remained neutral well into 1940. This unit would have been alone if Italy had attacked at once and if the REAF's No. 1 Squadron Gladiators had not stood ready to play their part.

To make the situation even more threatening, the Nazi–Soviet Pact which resulted in Poland being attacked from both west and east by Germany and the Soviet Union, raised fears in Britain, France and their respective empires that the USSR might invade neutral Turkey or Persia (Iran) – or that the latter might permit Soviet forces to cross their territories to attack the British and French in the Arab Middle East. Indeed, at one point it seems that this danger appeared greater than that from Italy which, despite the Pact of Steel between Mussolini and Hitler, remained neutral.

The USA was also watching the situation closely. With a heritage of antipathy towards the European colonial empires and a population which was largely opposed to becoming involved in another 'European civil war', the USA would remain firmly neutral for a long time. Therefore, American President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to be zones of conflict which no American ships should enter. The German and Soviet conquest and occupation of Poland was followed by the so-called Phoney War. A lack of military action, especially in the Middle East, resulted in the REAF being stood down and returning to peacetime stations where its units continued intensive training. The lack of immediate conflict also enabled the REAF to continue its expansion programme helped, though in a reduced manner, by the British. Most obviously, the REAF's FTS increased its training courses at Almaza.

All seemed to be calm, but in reality there was already political dissatisfaction within the Egyptian armed forces, not least in the Air Force where a small number of junior officers formed secret groups which hoped to use the danger in which the British Empire found itself to advance the cause of genuine Egyptian independence. Most remained strongly loyal to King Faruq as their country's leader, though some also had links to, or sympathies with, the Muslim Brotherhood and *Misr al-Fatat*. Very few could be described as left wing and still less as communist in their sympathies. They were Egyptian nationalists and, by and large, royalists.



Gloster Gladiators of the REAF's No. 2 Squadron putting on a live-firing and bombing display for Egyptian Army officers and some of their British advisors, probably in 1939. (EAF Museum collection)

The men of No. 5 Squadron, one of the REAF's two Gloster Gladiator fighter squadron, on parade early in 1940. Newly qualified *Tayyar Thani* (Pilot Officer) Muhammad Abu Zaid is believed to be the tall man marching second from the left in the front rank. (Abu Zaid family archive)

According to Ahmad Hamrush, the Egyptian author, journalist, political activist and ex-army officer, the secret group which later evolved into Colonel Nasser's Free Officers Movement was actually formed in 1939. Initially it consisted of seven REAF officers: Abd al-Latif Baghdadi, Hassan Ibrahim, Husayn Zulfiqar Sabri, Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf, Wagih Abaza, Ahmad Sa'udi and Hassan Izzat. There are several differing accounts of the early months of this movement, often reflecting competing claims to have either instigated or been involved in the movement which eventually overthrew King Faruq and subsequently established a republican system of government. However, all agree that young pilots from the REAF played a leading role in the earliest days. Furthermore, these men were mostly from either No. 2 or No. 3 Squadrons. Amongst them Hassan Izzat would have a particularly chequered career, often in trouble with the authorities, as was his army friend and colleague Anwar Sadat, both being audacious to the point of recklessness. As time went by, most such men would become increasingly radical and nationalistic.

After the fall of France in 1940 and the series of military setbacks suffered by Britain at the hands of Germany in 1941, they came to believe that the British Empire would lose the war. They were, of course, not alone in this. Back in 1939, however, Britain and France were equally confident of victory, though they anticipated a hard-fought and perhaps prolonged struggle similar to that endured during the First World War, to which would be added the horrors of aerial bombardment.

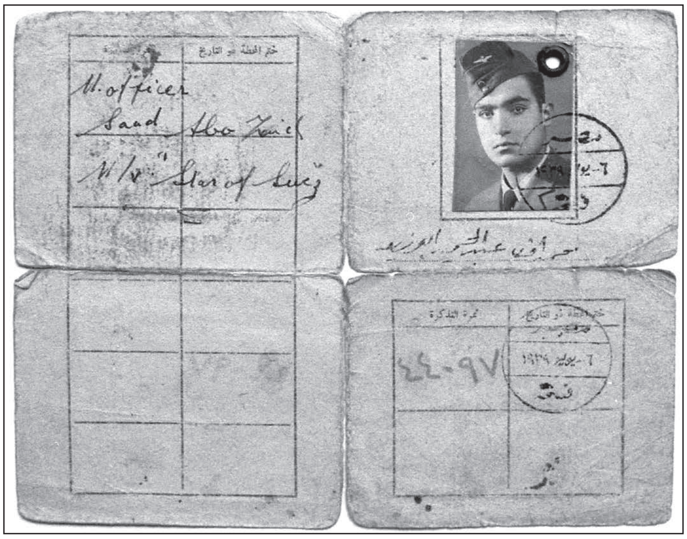
Following the outbreak of the Second World War, some members of the British Advisory Mission sent their families back to the United Kingdom, anticipating that the situation in the Middle East would probably be even worse than at home. Frederick Weston, on the other hand, sent his Egyptian wife Rose and two small sons to Alexandria while he moved into a small flat in the centre of Heliopolis, not far from Almaza where his work with the REAF continued, much as before, until June 1940.

Since taking over as Director or Commanding Officer of the REAF in May 1939, Brigadier Hasan Abd al-Wahab had won the respect of the British for his imposition of firmer discipline. Nevertheless, he was still an army rather than an air force officer and was also suspected by many in the REAF as being a 'government spy'. All agreed that he was an active and effective commander at a time when the small but expanding Egyptian Air Force needed such a leader. Its headquarters were still within the Ministry of War, though most administrative work was carried out at Almaza. The weakest aspect of the REAF seems, in fact, to have been its administration, which was run by relatively junior, inexperienced but well-qualified men. One such was Hassan Tawfiq who, since a crash caused permanent injury to one leg, had been given responsibility for various technical matters such as radio. Consequently, it was Hassan Tawfiq who established the REAF's first School of Wireless Engineering at Heliopolis aerodrome at the end of 1939. Like many others in a largely desk-bound role, he continued to make refresher flights to maintain his flying hours; these being done at the REAF's FTS.

At the end of October 1939, the REAF had a mixed inventory of 146 aeroplanes in flying condition: 32 Gladiators, 18 Lysanders, 24 'Egyptian' Audaxes (six Audax Panther VI and 18 Audax Panther X), 43 Magisters, 18 Avro 626s, six Gordons (still without effective target-towing gear), two archaic Moths, one Avro 652, one Wessex and one Commodore. The Gladiators of No. 2 Squadron were now responsible for the air defence of Cairo, being commanded by *Qa'id*

The cadets of the Egyptian Army Military Academy on parade in 1939, to mark their graduation. The best were then selected for the REAF, as virtually all these young men volunteered for the Air Force. (Abu Zaid family archive)

Liwa Hasan Abd al-Wahab Pasha (right) was regarded by the British as a more forceful Director of the REAF than his predecessor, *Liwa* Ali Islam Bey. He was, however, less popular amongst his own men, many of whom regarded him as a "palace placement". He is seen here with *Tayar Awal* Abd al-Hamid Sulayman (left) in 1939. (EAF Museum, Cairo)



ختم المحطة ذو التاريخ

M. officer
Saad Abu Zaid
M/V "Star of Suez"

نمرة التذكرة

٤٤-٩٧

٦ يوليو ١٩٣٩

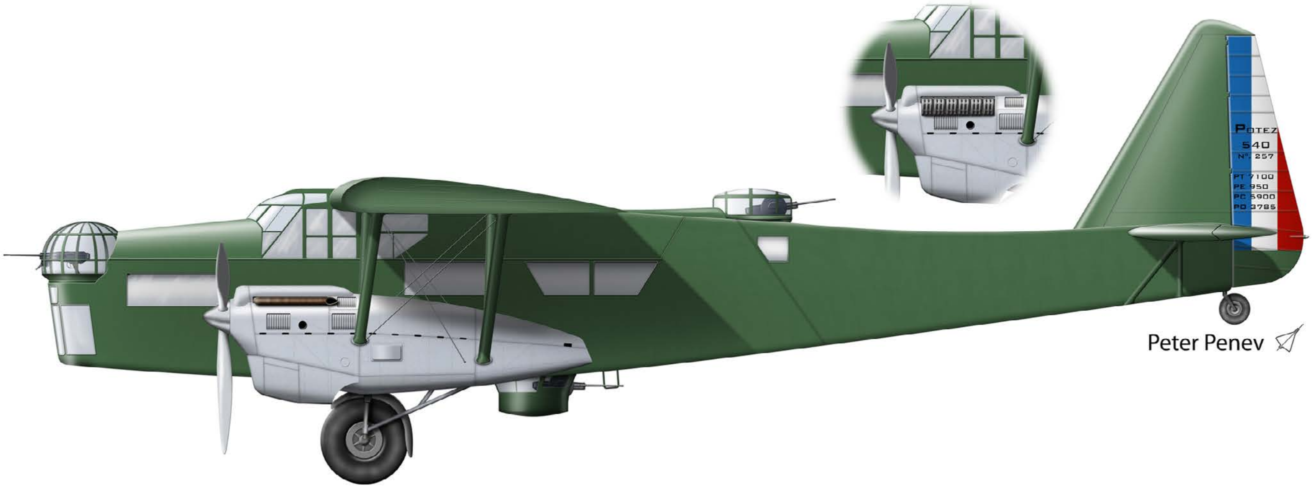
Muhammad Abu Zaid would become the best known REAF pilot of the 1948 Palestine War. After being commissioned as an Egyptian officer, he was sent to the REAF's FTS at Almaza and received his new REAF cadet identity card on 6 July 1939. In it his next-of-kin was specified as Sa'ad Abu Zaid, currently aboard the ship *Star of Suez*. (Abu Zaid family archive)

Sirb (Flight Lieutenant) Ahmad Nagi until the end of 1939. *Tayyar Awwal* (Flying Officer) Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia may have been in command of No. 5, the Gladiator (Fighter) Squadron which was still being formed, though this is not entirely clear. *Tayyar Awwal* (Flying Officer) Hassan Izzat was meanwhile in charge of supplies and maintenance for both these fighter units, a role which brought him into close association with RAF stores depots in Egypt. This was something that Izzat would take advantage of in the future.

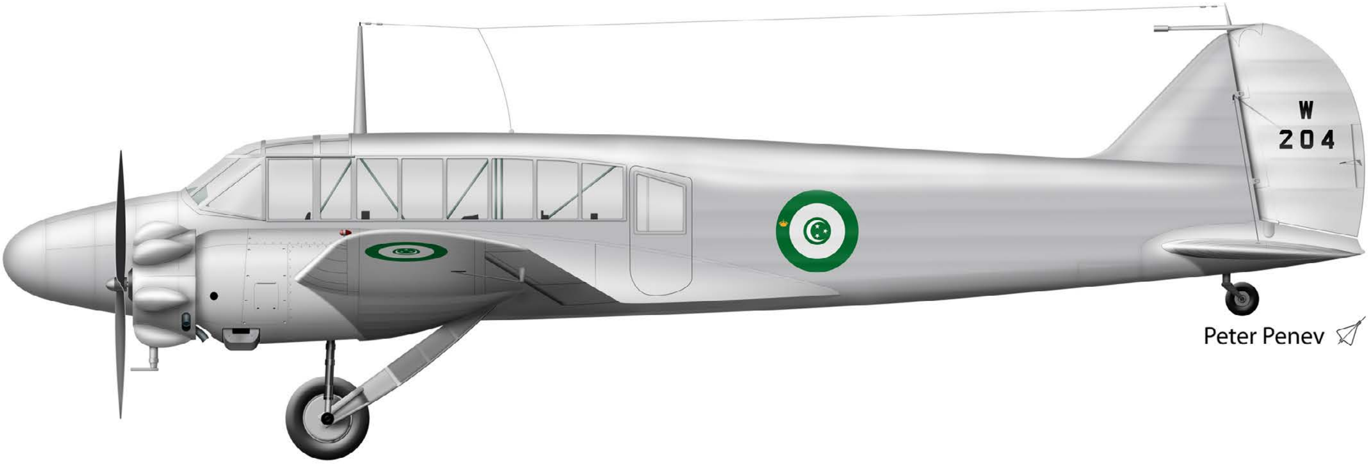
According to the pilot's logbook of Muhammad Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid, who was currently learning to fly at the REAF's FTS at Almaza, the CO of this Flying Training School or Squadron was still *Tayyar Awwal* (Flying Officer) Nu'man Nada (last mentioned in Abu Zaid's logbook on 9 January 1940 by which time he had probably been promoted to *Qa'id Sirb* or Flight Lieutenant). Next door to the hangers of the FTS were those of No. 3 (Comm.) Squadron where *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Ibrahim Hakki took over shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War. He may also have been working as a navigational instructor at the FTS, though this is again unclear. Meanwhile, 25 kilometres north-east of Cairo, an Aircraft Repair Depot was to be established at Jabal Asfar (Khanka).

Naturally, the outbreak of war had an impact upon the Egyptian government's seven-year plan of military expansion, several contracts for new aeroplanes being put on hold, some never to be restarted. The construction of new aerodromes stopped, work at Marsa Matruh which was to have been the REAF's new base in the north-west of the country was similarly halted, as were improvements to Dakhailah outside Alexandria, despite the fact that a substantial part of the REAF would soon be based there. It was not only the war which blocked Egypt's dream of a modern air force consisting of 12 squadrons; the country would soon also face severe financial problems. As a result, the REAF, though it remained intact, was left without any realistic future planning; a situation which outlasted the premiership of Ali Mahir, Hassan Sabri Pasha and Husain Sirry Pasha.

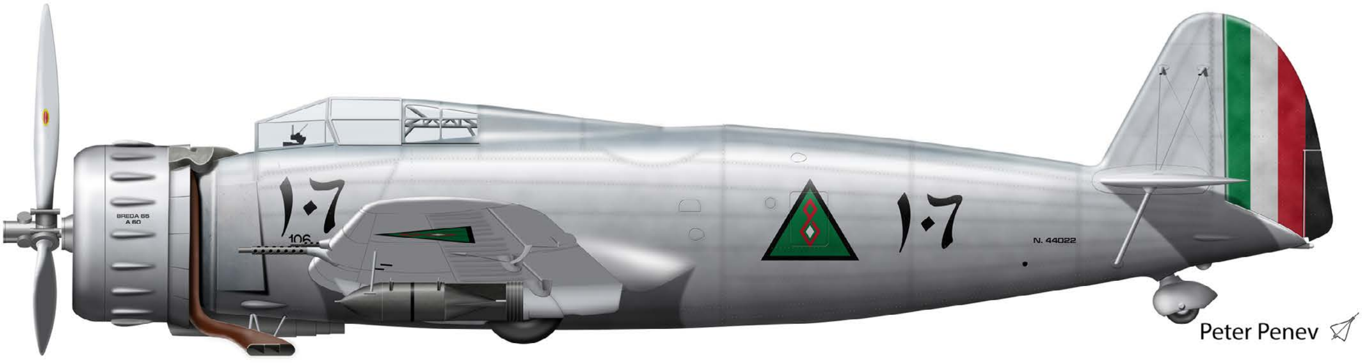
On the other hand, for the first time in its history the REAF, like the Egyptian Army, briefly found the British eager to supply spares and other equipment – so long as this did not weaken the British military position. Again for the first and almost the last time, Britain actively courted Egyptian military support. For the Egyptians, the most immediately valuable aspect of this new British policy was help



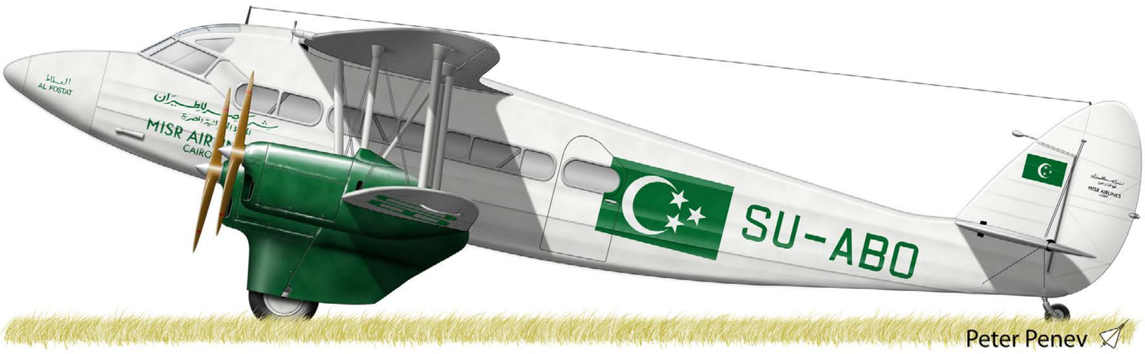
This was a Potez 542 of the *3rd Escadrille* of the *41st Escadre* (individual number 257) as it appeared during a flight to French Indochina. The aircraft was probably one of the three Potez 542s and seven Loire 130s which were sent to strengthen the *Armée de l'Air* in the Far East early in 1939. The only difference between the Potez 540 and the Potez 542 was their engines, no variations being visible from the outside. The aircraft is overall *vert tableau*, which was described as being very similar to the green baize cloth traditionally used on card tables. Here the main image shows the engines without Bronzavia manifold flame dampers mounted on the exhaust pipes. These were added later, as show on the inset image. The squadron badge has also not yet been painted on the fuselage or tailfin, while the writing on the rudder consists of the type identification, serial number and four rows of technical information. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



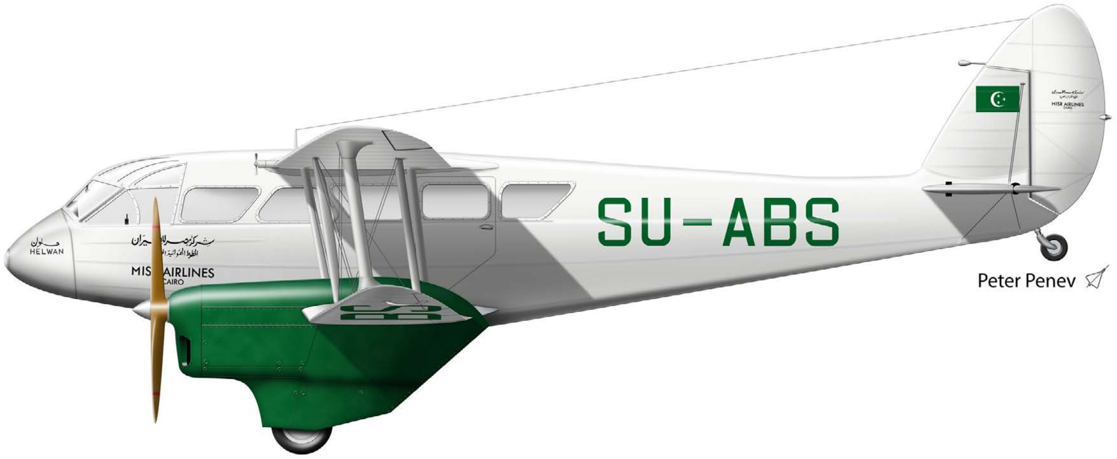
The Avro 652A was an Anson prototype, having been developed from the Avro 652 airliner of which only two were constructed. Here it is shown as it appeared at the time of delivery and for a while afterwards. Later, during the Second World War, the middle four side windows were altered so that there were new horizontal bars just above half way up, probably indicating that they could now be opened for ventilation. The most obvious differences between the Avro 652A prototype and the production Avro Anson Mk. 1 light bomber were the shallower slope of the former's windscreen, the profile of its unglazed nose and in the regular curvature of the upper line of the fuselage, all of which were inherited from the Avro 652 airliner. The six side windows were of a simpler shape and were all of the same width while the door is now on the left rather than right side of the fuselage and was deeper, with a different shape. Furthermore, the prototype does not have an upper gunner's turret. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



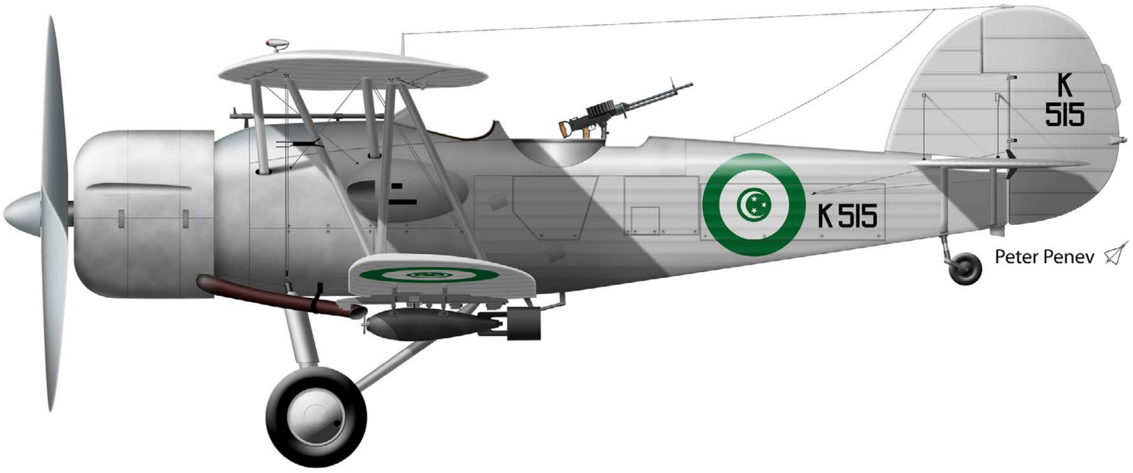
The RIrAF Flying School's two Breda Ba 65bis were a dual-control conversion trainer version of the Ba 65 ground-attack aircraft used by No. 5 Squadron. As such it lacked a gunner's turret and the profile of the cockpit glazing was consequently different. The different engines used in Italian and Iraqi versions of these aircraft meant that the small streamlined fairings on the engine cowling of the Iraqi aeroplanes were smaller, and the pattern of their arrangement simpler, than on most other versions of the Breda Ba 65. Its black serial number is painted on the both the front and rear fuselage, being repeated in much smaller European numerals immediately below the foremost of the front fuselage numbers. There is also a type designation, BREDA 65 A 60, written between the small streamlined fairings on the side of the engine cowling. The small black construction number on the rear fuselage of this particular machine is unknown but was likely around N.44022. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



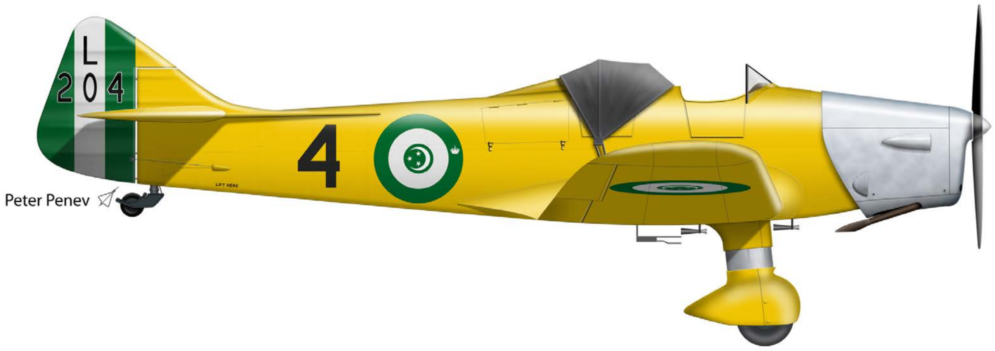
The DH.86 Express was a larger and more streamlined, four-engine development of the twin-engine DH.84 Dragon. This aeroplane with Egyptian civil registration SU-ABO, was one of two DH.86s and one DH.86A used by the Egyptian national carrier Misr Airlines during the Second World War. Its individual name *Al Fostat*, as well as the company name and location, are written in English and Arabic on the sides of the nose. There was always a small green and white Egyptian flag on the tail-fin but during the Second World War, probably at an early date, a much larger Egyptian flag was added to the sides of the fuselage. This was presumably to emphasise the fact that these aeroplanes and their country, Egypt, were at least theoretically neutral. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



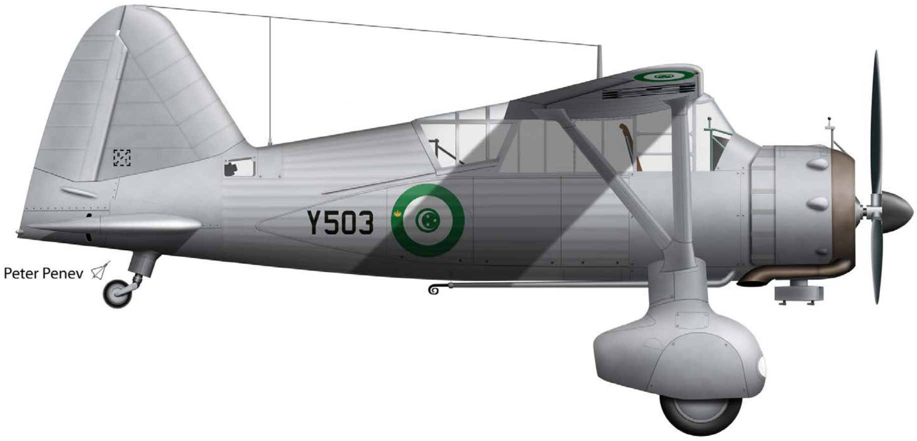
During the war it was planned that, if required, Misr Airlines aeroplanes would be used for casualty evacuation. So the crews were trained accordingly. Like all Misr Airline machines, this machine, Egyptian civil registration SU-ABS (c/n 6303), was painted overall white with green trim and lettering. Its individual name *Helwan* was also written in Arabic and English on the sides of the nose, behind which was Misr Airlines' name and information. The four lines of writing on the rudder are the same as on the front fuselage below the cockpit, but much smaller, while there was also a small Egyptian flag on the tail-fin; a feature shared by Misr Airlines and the smaller aircraft of Misr Airwork and its Flying School. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



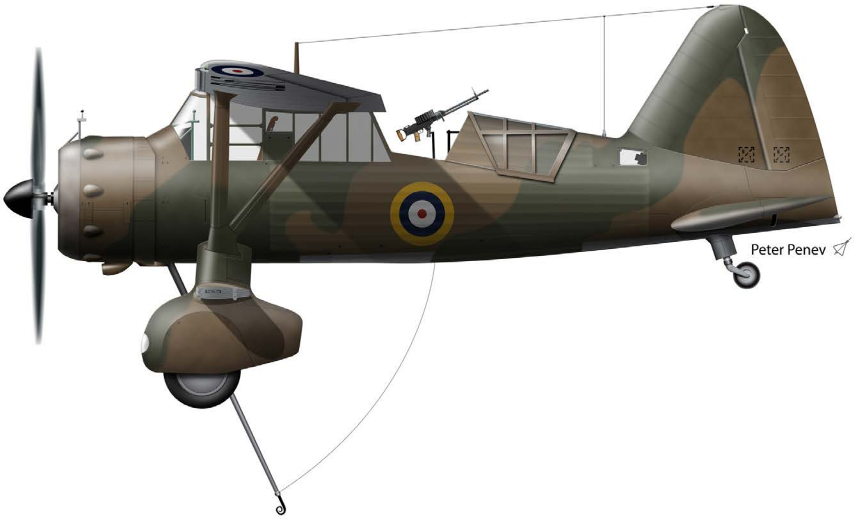
Egyptian Audaxes like this one, serial number K515 with numbers in the K500 range, were powered by Armstrong Siddeley Panther X engines whereas earlier machines with serials in the K400 range had Panther VIA engines. The aeroplane was also equipped with low pressure tyres suitable for unsurfaced desert airstrips, a Fairey Reed propeller and tailwheel, unlike the protype which had a tail-skid. Quite large port and starboard lights were added above the outer leading edges of the upper wings after these machines were delivered to Egypt, probably after REAF aircrew started training in bad weather and night flying. REAF Audaxes had only recently fitted with a Lewis gun on the Hawker-Scarff Ring in the observer's cockpit; this particularly aircraft also carrying a full bomb-load on underwing bomb-racks which could alternatively be used to carry stores. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



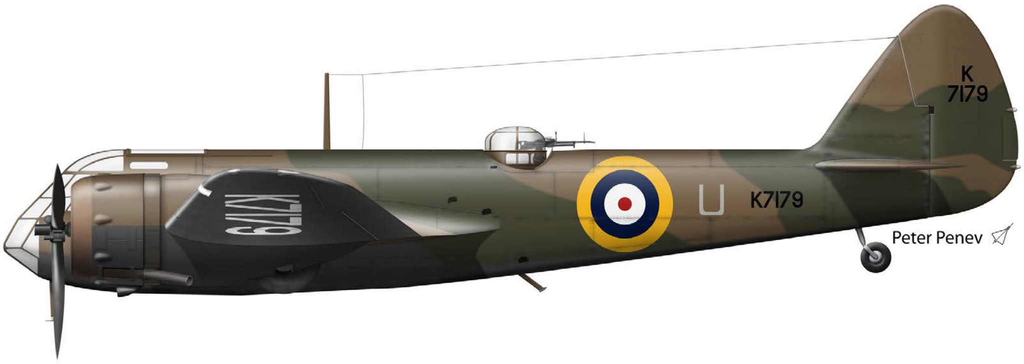
This aeroplane, serial number L204, is from the first production version of the Miles Magister M.14A. In an effort to cure the tendency to spin found with the original M.14, strakes had been added along the sides of the rear fuselage merging into the leading edges of the tail-planes, plus a lower and broader form of tail-fin and rudder. However, the problem was not entirely solved, so, in the next M.14B version, further modifications would be made to the tail-fin and rudder. This REAF type is unusual because in the centre of the REAF roundel on the right side of the fuselage the crescent open “towards the left”, whereas such crescents usually opened forwards. The final digit of the serial number, 4, is also repeated large and in black on the rear fuselage. Here the machine still has the longer form of exhaust pipe beneath its engine cowling and is shown with the “blind flying hood” shown in the closed position. In later years the spats around the wheels of REAF Magisters were often removed for ease of cleaning and maintenance. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



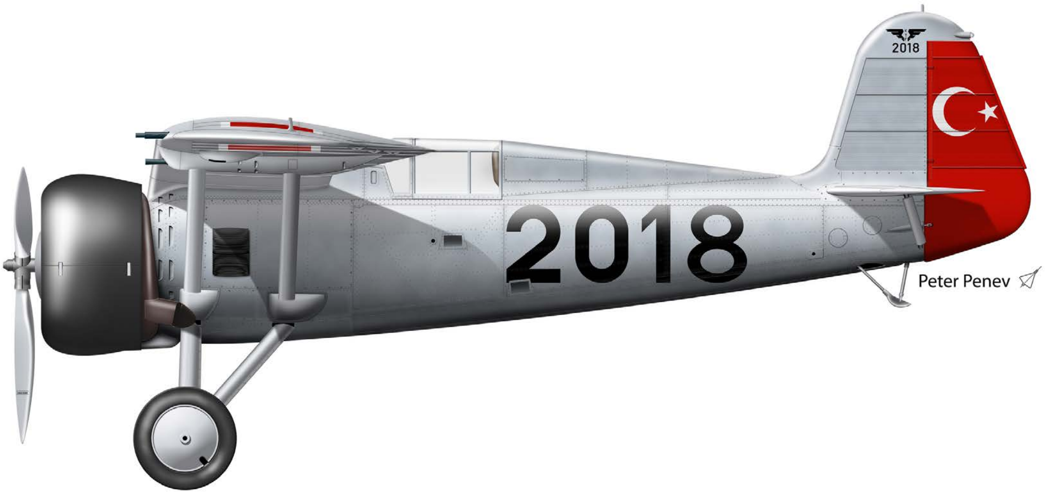
This aeroplane, serial number Y503, was a newly-built machine delivered straight to the REAF. As in British RAF aircraft of the time, there are no national markings on the tail. The crown on the outer ring of the fuselage roundel is still yellow-gold but would later be changed to white when the gold crown was reserved for Royal Flight aircraft. There is also a large sand-filter for the oil-cooler beneath the engine cowling. However, the stub-wings and their bomb-carriers have here been removed from the undercarriage struts. Furthermore, the observer-gunner’s position does not yet have a machine-gun. In this configuration at least one Westland Lysander Mk. I of No. 1 Squadron was photographed in Lebanon, perhaps during a courtesy visit or carrying a senior Egyptian officer before the Fall of France, after which Lebanon and Syria came under the control of the now nominally neutral Vichy French government. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



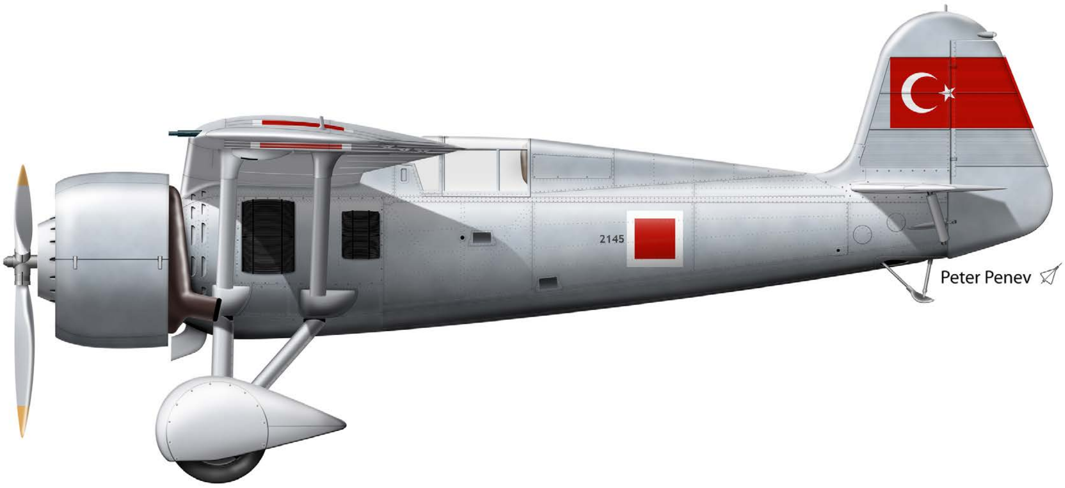
Here number L4710 of No. 208 Squadron RAF is shown as it appeared in Egypt early in 1940. It is also in its slow-flying attitude, with the leading-edge flaps extended, the message retrieval hook lowered, the cockpit canopies open, and the tailplanes angled slightly downwards, but without bombs or other loads attached to racks on the stub wings or beneath the rear fuselage. Despite being based in Egypt, the Lysander still wore green and brown temperate European camouflage on its upper surfaces, while the underneath of the wings, and a relatively narrow part of the lower fuselage were painted sky grey. The serial number L4710 is only painted beneath the wings, to be read from the front on the left wing and from the rear on the right wing. During this first phase of the Second World War the RAF roundels on the sides of the fuselage and on the tops of the wings are still outlined in yellow, though they do not have this additional yellow ring beneath the wings and there are no national markings on the tail. Furthermore, this machine does not yet have the large oil-cooler filter beneath the engine cowling, which would be added later. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



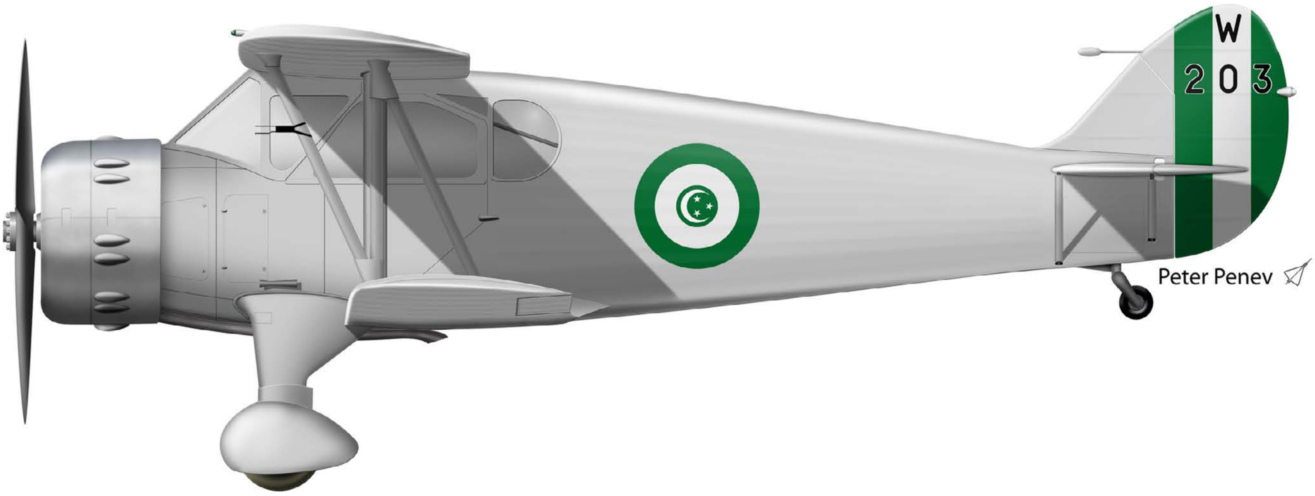
This aeroplane, serial number K7179, was used by No. 30 Squadron which had been re-equipped with the Bristol Blenheim Mk. I in 1938. As part of what was called the "Iraq garrison", No. 30 Squadron occasionally sent aircraft to other locations around the Arabian coast, such as Sharjah and Aden. In August 1939, with the approach of war, No. 30 Squadron was transferred to Ismailia in Egypt to protect the Suez Canal. The Squadron's Blenheims then undertook bombing and fighter escort roles until the squadron was re-equipped with Hawker Hurricanes in 1941. Number K7179 later served in No. 211 Squadron from 1941 and was then transferred to No. 72 OTU in Egypt, along with several other Blenheim Mk. I aircraft which had originally been flown by No. 30 Squadron. Some or most of the RAF Blenheims based in the UK had their individual identification code letter painted on the side of the nose. However, those of No. 30 Squadron had theirs, in this case the letter U, on the rear fuselage. This may have been because in the Middle East, where the machines were parked in the open, the entire glazed nose of the aircraft was covered in a tarpaulin hood to shade the cockpit. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



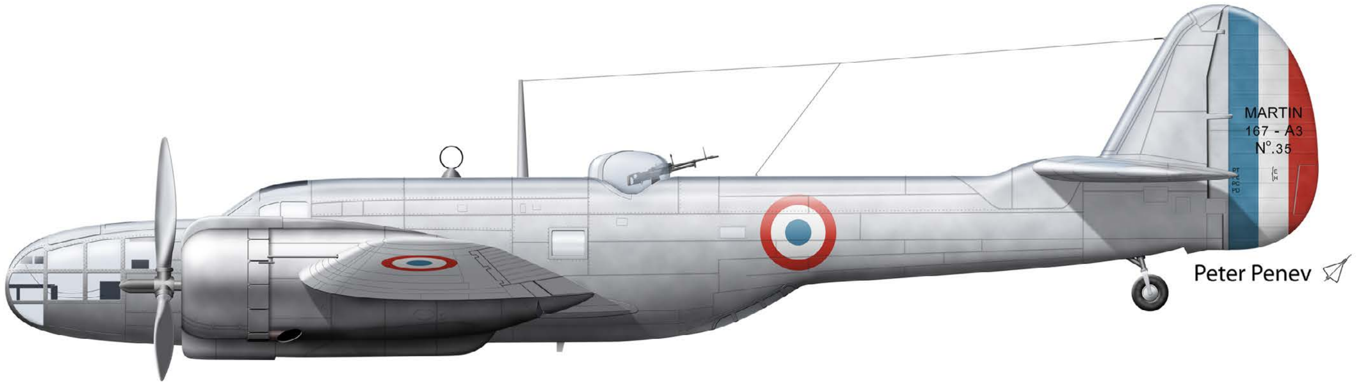
Before the Second World War, Turkey purchased fourteen PZL P.24A fighters from Poland, powered by Gnome-Rhône 14Kfs engines. They were armed with two 20 mm Oerlikon FFS guns and two 7,92 mm Vickers wz. E machine guns. Twenty-six P.24Cs armed with four machine guns and two 50 kg bombs were also bought; all of these Turkish PZL fighters having been delivered by 1937. Forty P.24A and P.24C aircraft were subsequently built under license by the Kayseri Tayyar e Fabrikasi in Turkey, including the P.24A number 2018 shown here. These aircraft were distinguished by having the KTF insignia near the top of their tail fins. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



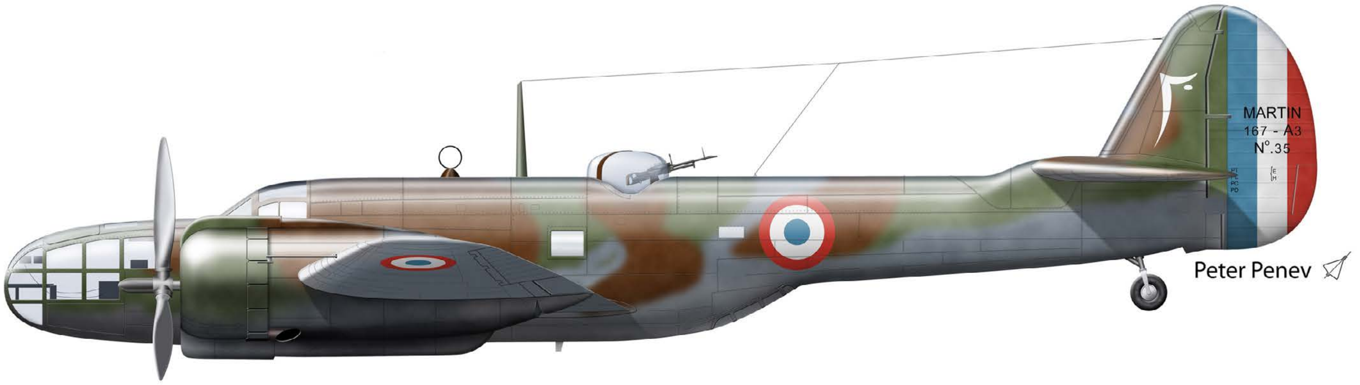
An additional thirty Polish designed PZL P.24G aircraft with more powerful 970 hp (720 kW) Gnome-Rhône 14N-07 engines and armed with four machine guns and bombs were also acquired. In 1939 several of the Turkish Air Force's P.24A and P.24C machines were rebuilt to PZL P.24G standard, including 2145 shown here. These already obsolescent aircraft remained in Turkish combat units until 1943, the last PZL P-24 being withdrawn from front-line service in 1945. The survivors then soldiered on as advanced trainers with the Turkish Air Force Flying School until at least 1948, some or all probably having been re-equipped with Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp engines. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



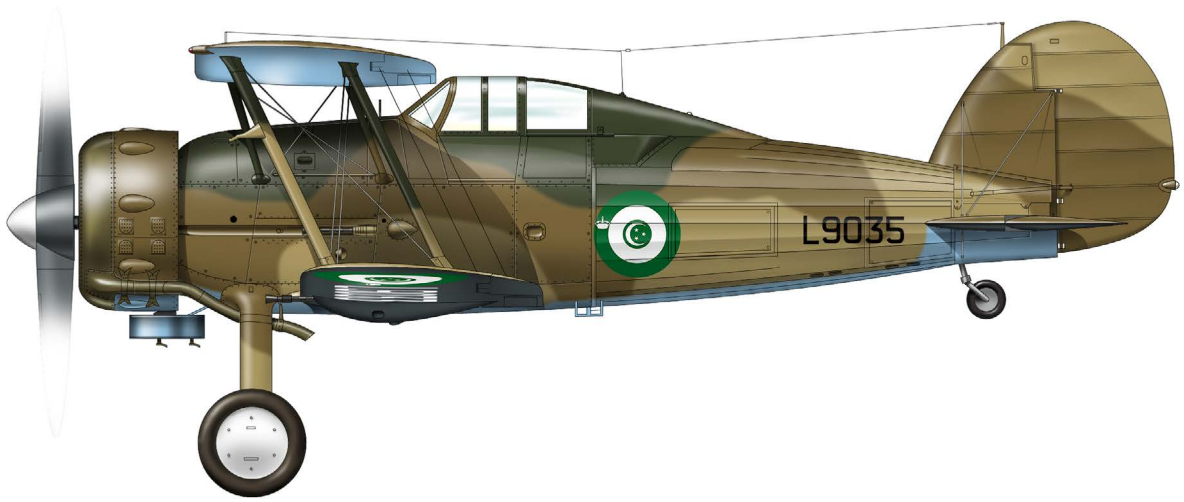
After Squadron Leader V.H. Tait's Avro 641 Commodore was handed over the REAF, its civilian registration SU-AAS was replaced by the military serial number W203. Egyptian national markings were also added, though apparently without roundels beneath the lower wings. The machine retained its overall silver dope and bare metal appearance. Here it is shown after it was given a replacement engine taken from an unserviceable Avro Anson, when Flight Lieutenant Gazerine exchanged the original 215 hp Armstrong Siddeley Lynx IVC seven-cylinder radial engine with a more powerful and physically larger 350 hp Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah IX of similar weight. As a result, the engine cowling needed to be beaten into a different shape by REAF technicians, resulting in numerous pairs of streamlined fairings, two outside each cylinder-head. The aeroplane probably also has a replacement metal propeller, probably coming with the engine from an Avro Anson, though this might be the old propeller with its small spinner removed. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



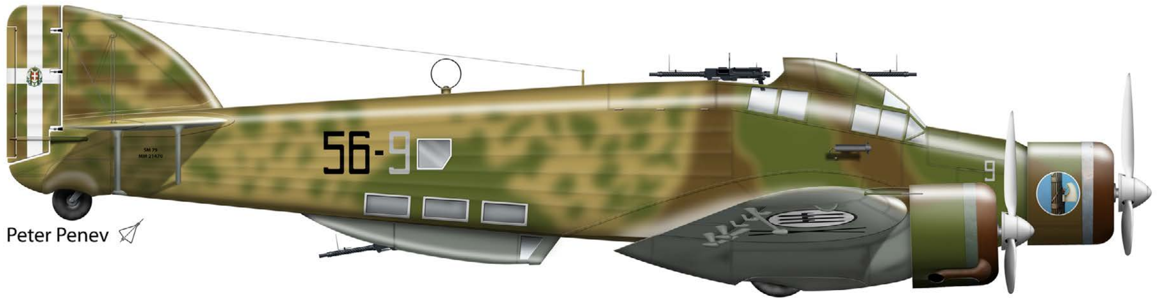
The first batch of nine Glenn Martin 167F bombers delivered to France were shipped directly from the USA to Le Havre in France in December 1939. They were then assembled in France before being transferred to North Africa. The French government next decided to set up a *Très Secret* assembly plant at Casablanca in Morocco. This started work in January 1940 but was delayed until February because additional equipment was needed from France. The assembled machines were originally intended for GB 1/62, II/62, I/63 and II/63 based in North Africa, but some were also sent to GB I/39. Further confusion followed because of uncertainty about Italy's entry into the war, followed by the Armistice. At that time about thirty Glenn Martin 167s were still in their crates, unassembled, while others were still aboard ship in crates. However, by the end of 1940 almost all had been assembled. This particular machine, serial number 35, is shown before it was allocated to a squadron, with in an overall bare metal finish but without the red nose and fuselage stripe which only seems to have been given to the first aircraft to emerge from the Casablanca factory. Unusually, there appears to be an angular "left hand bracket" immediately to the left of the letters E and the H in the characteristic *Armée de l'Air* technical information painted on the rudder. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



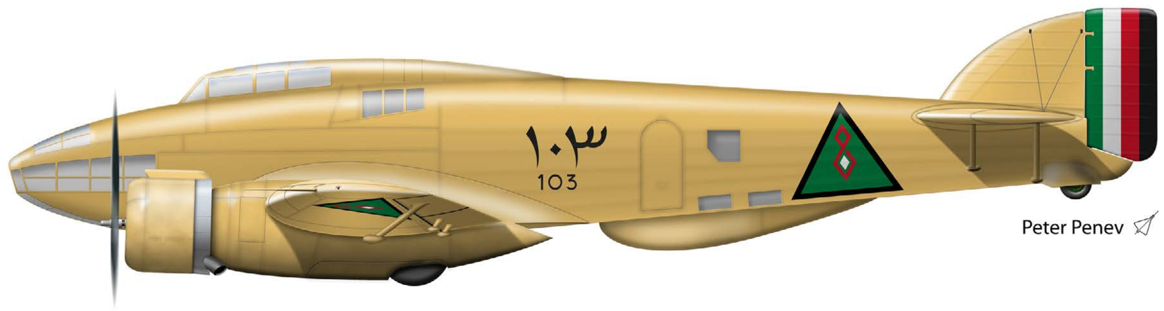
Glenn Martin 167F serial number 35 was eventually allocated to GB I/39, which had originally been intended to be re-equipped with Douglas DB-7s. This Bomber Group was based in Lebanon and this particular machine was written off in an accident on 5th April 1941. By that time, it had been given a camouflage scheme consisting of green, brown and grey upper surfaces, with grey underneath. Like many *Armée de l'Air* aeroplanes in Lebanon and Syria during this period, its individual code number, in this case 2, was written as a large Arabic numeral on the tail-fin. Note that the white spot just below the horizontal stroke of this Arabic number is a hole through the tail-plane, not a painted mark or Arabic zero. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



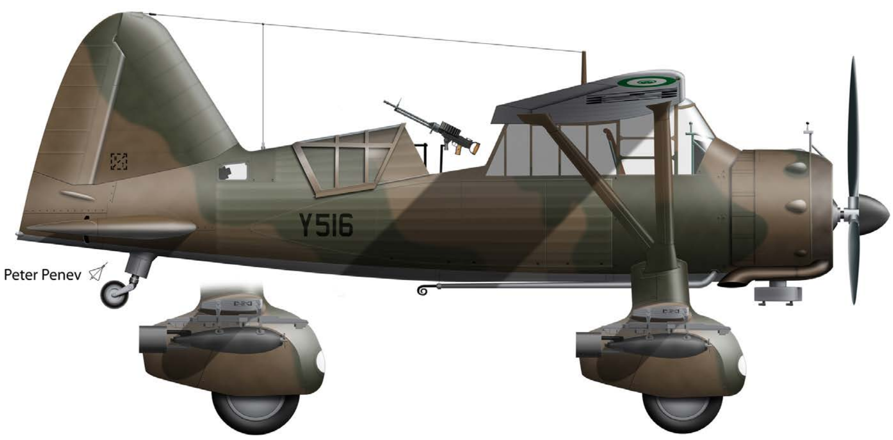
The most obvious differences between Royal Egyptian Air Force Gladiators of Nos. 2 and 5 Squadrons at this time, was that those of No. 5 Squadron, including serial number L9035 shown here, lacked national marking stripes on their tailfin whereas those of No. 2 Squadron did have such a marking. Initially No. 5 Squadron's Gladiators also lacked sand-filters for the air-intakes of their oil-coolers beneath the engine cowling. These were added a short time later and were clearly in place by the time No. 5 flew operational patrols over Cairo and Suez. No colour photographs of these aeroplanes exist, but there were clearly three different tones on the upper and side surfaces of L9035 and the other Gladiators in No. 5 Squadron but not, apparently, on those of No. 2 Squadron. This strongly suggests that a third colour was added in Egypt. The most likely interpretation is that this aeroplane originally had an RAF Pattern Number 5 "Temperate Land Scheme" of dark green and dark earth, with a "Middle East Scheme" middle stone colour added before the old RAF roundels were replaced with REAF roundels. A comparable, if perhaps unofficial, three-tone upper and side surfaces scheme was also seen on some Royal Australian Air Force Gladiators in North Africa at this time. The underneath of the right upper and lower wings, the right tail-plane and the entire underneath of the fuselage was azure blue. The under-surfaces of left lower wing and left tailplane were painted black, but apparently not the underneath of the upper left wing. (Artwork by Richard Caruana)



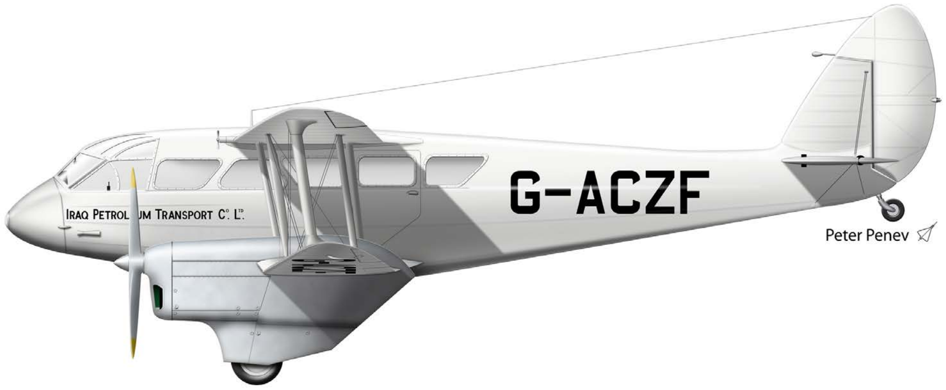
At this time the *56th Squadriglia* formed part of the *30 Gruppo*, *10 Stormo BT*, based at Derna N1 aerodrome. It was tasked with anti-naval duties in the Mediterranean east of Malta, as well as armed reconnaissance. On 17th August 1940 this aeroplane, identification number 56-9, was one of several Italian aircraft attacking a British naval force which had just raided Bardia. It was intercepted by Flying Officer John Lapsley in a Hurricane of the RAF's No. 80 Squadron and the crew were obliged to make an emergency landing in the desert. The machine was then found by Allied soldiers who wrote an obscene comment about Mussolini on the fuselage. The battered Savoia Marchetti SM.79-1 was subsequently disassembled and transported to Alexandria where it was re-assembled and erected for public display with its propellers still bent and its undercarriage now lowered; the obscene comment having been removed. The aircraft's apparently mixed camouflage scheme consists of an earlier banded pattern on the tail and front fuselage and a more recent blotched pattern on the rest of the fuselage. This might have been a result of the aircraft being shot down before the second camouflage scheme was completed. Other photographs show no sign of the newer scheme on the wings, perhaps suggesting that it had originally been intended for the Balkan front or had been based in Sicily, but was hurriedly repainted for its new duties and location. The type identification and an unfortunately unknown MM number are in small back lettering beneath the tail-plane. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



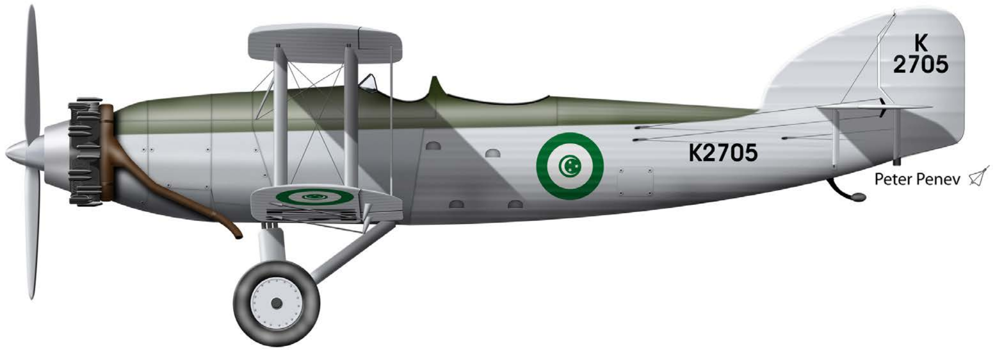
The Royal Iraqi Air Force's No. 6 Squadron was normally based at Mu'askar al-Rashid (ex-RAF Hinaidi) outside the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. Its aircraft's sandy yellow camouflage was probably Italian Regia Aeronautica Giallo Mimetico (1092/1097) which was applied to both upper and lower surfaces. Apart from its distinctive triangular national and rudder stripes, the only other markings on this machine were the aeroplane's individual identification number 103, which was applied in large Arabic and considerably smaller European numerals on the sides of the fuselage. This machine does not have the pennon-shaped Savoia Marchetti company and type badge on the fuselage above the wings which had only been applied to number 100, the first SM.79B to arrive in Iraq. Number 100 also lacked the extensive glazing on top of its nose which was a feature of all subsequent aircraft, including number 103 seen here. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



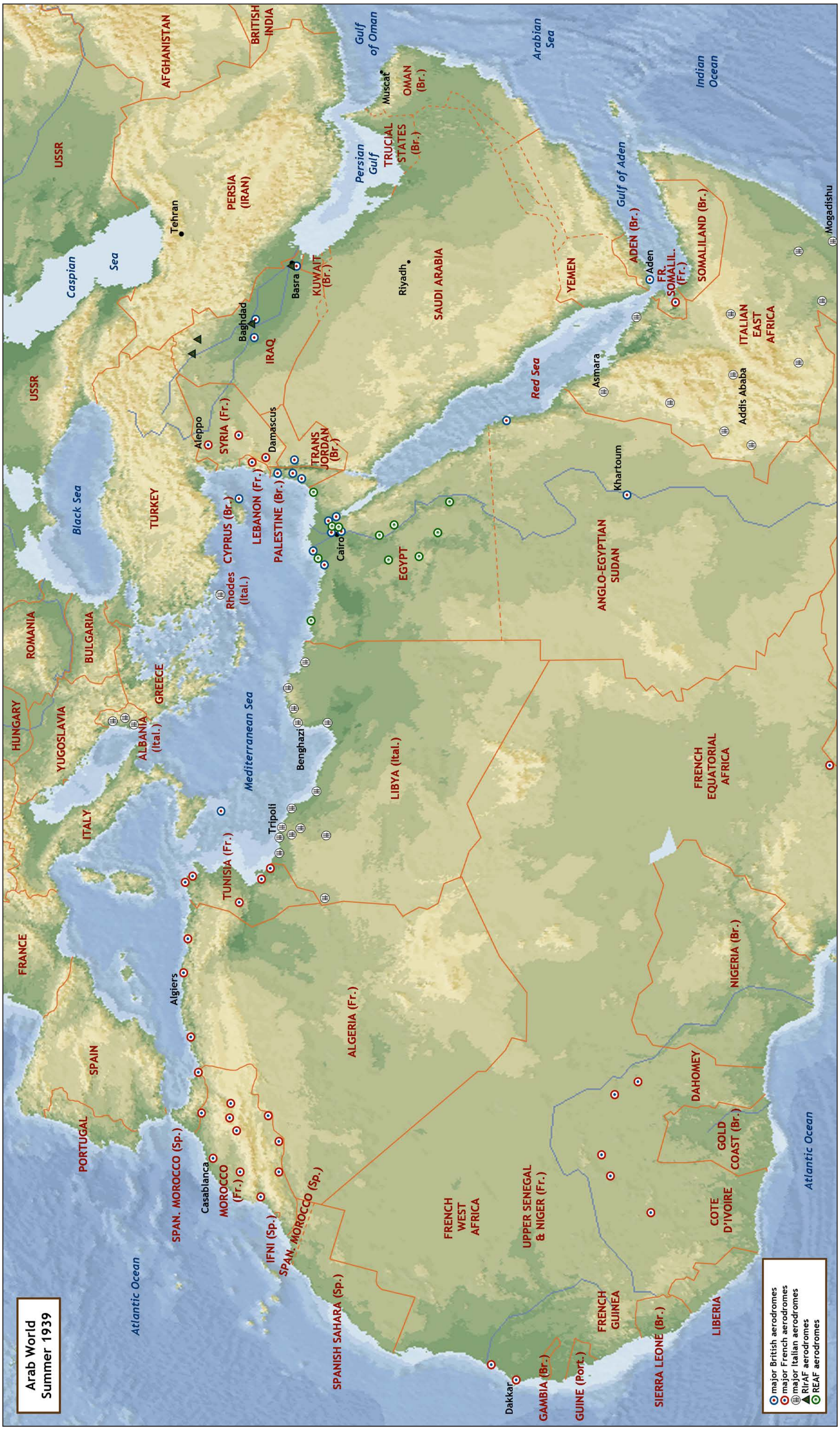
This Egyptian aeroplane, number Y516, is shown in its transitional phase, with the upper and side surfaces already painted in standard British RAF "temperate European" brown and dark green camouflage while the under surfaces are still in silver dope with the large black serial number beneath the wings, read as usual from the front on the left wing and from the rear on the right wing. There is still no REAF roundel on the fuselage, and no national identification stripes on the tail-fin, while the Egyptian roundels beneath the wings are still in their original form. A special and temporary style of REAF roundels would soon be applied; these having been specially introduced for REAF Lysanders operating within the "combat zones" of the North African campaign. The aeroplane has its stub-wings attached to the undercarriage, plus bomb racks carrying bombs. These racks had the aeroplane's individual identification number painted on them, plus the letters LO or RO, indicating that each Lysander had its own set. These Egyptian Lysanders had at last also been issued with machine-guns for the observer's position. (Artwork by Peter Penev)


G-ACZF
IRAQ PETROLEUM TRANSPORT Cº Lᵀᴰ
Peter Penev

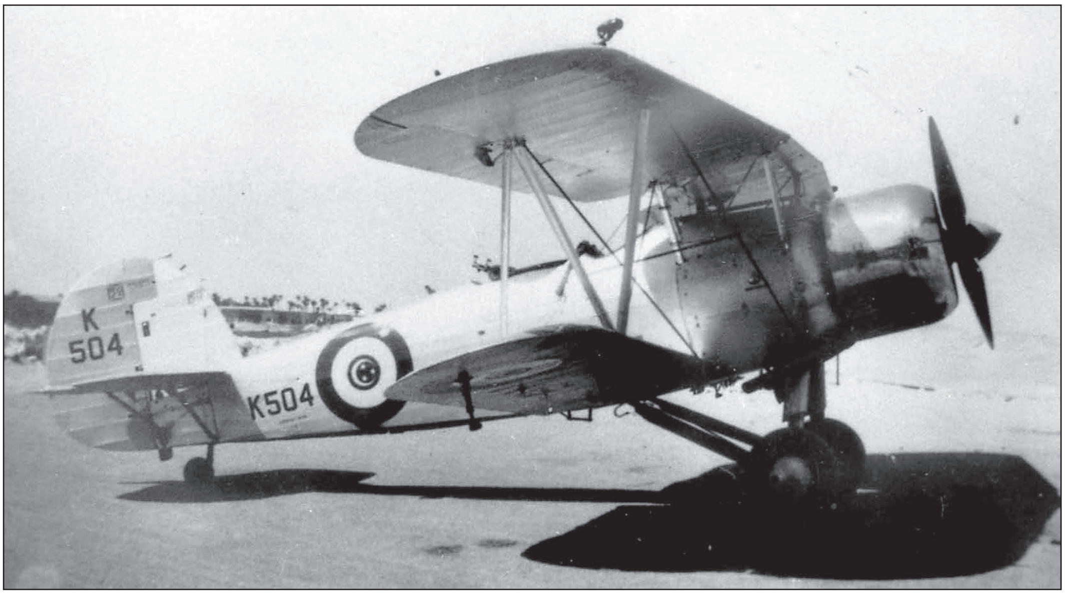
De Havilland DH.89A Dragon Rapide (c/n 6268) with the British civilian registration G-ACZF had been sold to the Iraq Petroleum Company before the Second World War, and would prove to be an important if rather mysterious aircraft. The machine was first registered to Airwork on 20 November 1934, the same date as G-ACZE, both Dragon Rapides promptly being used by what was then the Anglo-Persian Oil Co. Ltd of Abadan in Iran. This already had a substantial share in the Iraq Petroleum Company and a few years later the Dragon Rapides were repainted with the insignia of the Iraq Petroleum Transport Co. Ltd., as G-ACZF is shown here. Following the Fall of France in 1940 – and well away from any form of publicity – the British intelligence services used civilian aeroplanes belonging to this organisation, as well as others, to drop, collect and maintain contact with secret agents inside Vichy-controlled Syria. IPC's DH.84 Dragon G-ACHV had already been commandeered for the RAF on 30 March 1940, while IPC's DH.84 Dragon G-ACKB was similarly commandeered for the RAF on 7 July 1940, as was IPC's DH.89 Dragon Rapide G-ACZE on 15 July 1940. But G-ACZF was not taken over by the RAF – at least not officially. Instead, it transferred from the Iraq Petroleum Company to Abadan Airwork Ltd. and was probably involved in those clandestine flights between British dominated Iraq and Vichy ruled Syria. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



In late May 1938, six ex-RAF Fairey Gordons I day bomber and general-purpose aircraft, powered by Armstrong Siddeley Panther IIa engines, were allocated to the REAF from RAF stocks in the Middle East. Some or all had previously formed part of the RAF's No. 47 Squadron, including number K2705 which carried the individual code letter W while it was part of No. 47 Squadron in the Sudan. Their British national markings were removed and they were given normal REAF national markings, but retained their original RAF serial numbers. With their armament removed, they then formed a Target-Towing Flight, perhaps initially attached to No. 3 Squadron and later certainly attached to No. 4 Squadron, which nevertheless lacked target-towing gear until this were made by REAF technicians. Thereafter the Egyptian Fairey Gordons assisted the Egyptian Army's anti-aircraft regiments in calibration and training, until they became too time-worn to be flown. There is also no evidence that the Egyptian machines were ever painted with anything like the RAF's specialized yellow and black undersides Target-Towing High Visibility colour-scheme. (Artwork by Peter Penev)


Arab World
Summer 1939
major British aerodromes
major French aerodromes
major Italian aerodromes
RIrAF aerodromes
REAF aerodromes
USSR
AFGHANISTAN
BRITISH INDIA
PERSIA (IRAN)
Tehran
Caspian Sea
Gulf of Oman
Arabian Sea
Indian Ocean
Muscat
OMAN (Br.)
TRUCIAL STATES (Br.)
Persian Gulf
KUWAIT (Br.)
Basra
Baghdad
IRAQ
Riyadh
SAUDI ARABIA
YEMEN
ADEN (Br.)
Aden
Gulf of Aden
FR. SOMALIL. (Fr.)
SOMALILAND (Br.)
Mogadishu
ITALIAN EAST AFRICA
Addis Ababa
Asmara
Red Sea
Khartoum
ANGLO-EGYPTIAN SUDAN
EGYPT
Cairo
TRANS JORDAN (Br.)
Damascus
SYRIA (Fr.)
Aleppo
LEBANON (Fr.)
PALESTINE (Br.)
CYPRUS (Br.)
Rhodes (Ital.)
TURKEY
Black Sea
ROMANIA
BULGARIA
GREECE
HUNGARY
YUGOSLAVIA
ALBANIA (Ital.)
ITALY
Mediterranean Sea
Benghazi
LIBYA (Ital.)
Tripoli
TUNISIA (Fr.)
FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA
FRANCE
Algiers
ALGERIA (Fr.)
NIGERIA (Br.)
SPAIN
PORTUGAL
SPAN. MOROCCO (Sp.)
Casablanca
MOROCCO (Fr.)
IFNI (Sp.)
SPAN. MOROCCO (Sp.)
SPANISH SAHARA (Sp.)
FRENCH WEST AFRICA
UPPER SENEGAL & NIGER (Fr.)
DAHOMEY
GOLD COAST (Br.)
COTE D'IVOIRE
Atlantic Ocean
Atlantic Ocean
FRENCH GUINEA
LIBERIA
SIERRA LEONE (Br.)
GUINE (Port.)
GAMBIA (Br.)
Dakkar

(Map by Tom Cooper)



Hawker Egyptian Audax (K504), probably of No. 4 Squadron REAF, photographed early in the Second World War before some of the REAF's Audaxes were painted in a desert camouflage scheme. Egyptian Audaxes with serial numbers in the K500 range were powered by Armstrong Siddeley Panther X engines, whereas earlier machines with serials in the K400 range had Panther VIA engines. (Author's collection)

in military training, especially for the undeniably poorly trained army. For the REAF the most valuable aspect came in terms of more abundant spare parts for its aeroplanes and advanced training courses for its senior personnel.

Where new aeroplanes were concerned, the British were much more reticent. The Egyptians already had their eyes on Hawker Hurricane fighters and Bristol Blenheim bombers, as well as additional Gladiator biplanes. As early as November 1939 plans were in place for the establishment of one flight of Hurricanes to form the nucleus of a new squadron, No. 6, which was expected to become operational early in 1940. This did not happen. Instead, the British, understandably under current circumstances, insisted on sending new Hurricanes to the RAF while offering Gladiators to the overstretched REAF. Seen from the Egyptian point of view, the British refusal to supply Egypt with 18 Blenheim bombers appeared less justifiable. Production of these machines had started early in 1937 and would reach its peak in 1940. Put bluntly, the RAF seemed to have enough Blenheims, especially as the type would soon be outclassed by the opposition. For the present, Egypt was glad to receive additional Gloster Gladiators, the first 12 of those ordered before the outbreak of war arriving by the end of 1939. Another 27 would follow during the course of the Second World War, all being built as, or brought up to the standard of, Gladiator Mk. IIs.

REAF aircrew studying a map, as featured on the front page of the Cairo daily newspaper *Al-Ahram* on 6 December 1939. Second from the left appears to be Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia, the CO of No. 2 Squadron (EAF Museum collection)

Britain's generosity in terms of aircraft spares proved to be short-lived, and the REAF again soon found itself chronically short as the RAF took priority. Even the unanimously complimentary reports from British, British-Indian and Egyptian Army units concerning No. 1 Squadron's Army Cooperation work during combined training exercises in the Canal Zone and around Alexandria could not hide this underlying weakness. Meanwhile some REAF squadrons were in an even worse situation because they were not working as closely with the British. Indeed, some have claimed that the two Gladiator squadrons would receive practically no spares for airframes or engines until the Italian declaration of war in summer 1940. The situation was almost as bad where ammunition was concerned. So, it is perhaps understandable that Hassan Izzat, serving as equipment and spares officer for both the Gladiator squadrons, became increasingly frustrated.

The atmosphere was altogether more positive at the REAF Flying Training School where Muhammad Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid's training continued much as it had before the outbreak of war. His instructors included British advisors Britton, Dawn, Falconer, Humphrey, Huntley and Norris whose ranks ranged from Warrant Officer to Wing Commander. His Egyptian instructors were Anwar, Farid, Hafiz, Hassib, al-Maghribi, Nada and Zaki whose ranks ranged from *Tayyar Thani* (Pilot Officer) to *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant). During this stage of his training Abu Zaid flew Avro 626s (dual and solo) and Audaxes (dual and solo) plus two flights in a Magister (one solo and one dual). Abu Zaid's training now included a limited amount of night flying in an Avro 626, and what appears to have been one simulated forced landing, also in an Avro 626. On 7 December he flew with Squadron Leader Dawn as his passenger and recorded a 'Pass' in his logbook, this presumably having been part of an assessment at the end of the first phase of his flying training.

On 17 January 1940, Muhammad Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid received his pilot's wings and on the following day the last page of his logbook at a flying cadet concluded with the note: 'Above average Class B. Points to be watched NIL', this assessment being signed in English by Flight Lieutenant (*Qa'id Sirb*) Nada. On 28 January, Muhammad Abu Zaid made his final flight at the FTS, in Audax number K517 with Maghribi as passenger. During the intervening days he had probably been studying the Gloster Gladiator, his future

The Egyptians developed a reputation for excellent aerial photography, as demonstrated in this air-to-air study of one of the REAF's second batch of Hawker "Egyptian Audaxes" (K515) powered by an Armstrong Siddeley Panther X engine. (Author's collection)

mount in No. 5 Squadron, after which he signed his logbook and stated that he fully understood that machine's fuel ignition and lubrication systems. Two days later Muhammad Abu Zaid would make his first ascent in a single-seater Gladiator (serial number L9037) of his new operational squadron.

Nevertheless, the FTS was still having technical problems with its Magister primary training aeroplanes, the Advisory Mission Report for November 1939 noting that limitations with the Magisters' engines were holding up aerobatics training. Frederick Weston was now the engineering advisor at Almaza, initially attached to the REAF's Flying Training School and subsequently to the REAF Royal Flight which was part of No. 3 Squadron. His contract would run from 1939 to 1942 and, while attached to the FTS, his work focussed almost entirely upon the Miles Magister, giving lectures to the students and offering practical help to REAF air mechanics. He himself considered that the pilot cadets were of a very high calibre, having been recruited from Egypt's educated elite. In fact, their ability to memorise information from books and lecture notes was astonishing, most of them eventually knowing such information by heart.

On the other hand, Fred Weston regarded most of these students as less good at dealing with situations or problems which were not 'in the book'. As Weston told the author, and also wrote in his autobiography, *A Trenchard Brat: a Life in Aviation*, it was not that they lacked initiative in the Western European sense, but that their entire culture led them to expect to do things by the book. In general, they felt that, as Muslims, they were part of a higher civilisation but were at the same time aware of Western technical superiority. The result, in Weston's opinion, was some degree of inferiority complex alongside a sense of cultural superiority. Furthermore, such mixed attitudes caused the flying cadets to be even more than usually worried about making mistakes; hence their tendency to work 'by the book'. Although there were significant exceptions such as Hassan Tawfiq, Ibrahim Gazerine, and Abd al-Hamid Mahmud, Weston considered that the majority of cadets and qualified REAF officers were not very good at putting their undoubted theoretical knowledge into practice when it came to engines and airframe engineering.

Another, and sometimes even more serious, difficulty stemmed from the REAF's continuing shortage of technically proficient NCOs. These had largely been recruited from the non-elite section of Egyptian urban society and could read and write, but little more. Like the flying cadets and many of the officers, these technical NCOs also needed to work 'by the book' because, in Weston's opinion, they lacked the initiative, knowledge and confidence to do otherwise. Nevertheless, they worked hard and correctly carried out orders.

A small number of the REAF's most qualified officers had been sent on courses in Britain and some of them were still there when war broke out. One such was Hassan Tawfiq. His wife and daughter had been sent back to Egypt during an evacuation programme as the threat of war loomed, but promptly turned around the day after reaching Cairo, only to arrive back in the UK after war broke out. Thereupon Tawfiq, his wife and child were again shipped back to Egypt, but when nothing seemed to happen during the so-called Phoney War, all three returned to England so that Hassan Tawfiq could continue his course. This he had completed when the German Army invaded France and Italy entered the war in 1940, whereupon the Tawfiq family again returned to Egypt. During his initial brief return to Egypt in autumn 1939, Hassan Tawfiq appears to have made a few refresher flights in Magisters and Moths, but would undertake a more serious refresher course in 1940.

Intakes of flying cadets, who were either under training when the Second World War broke out or went to the REAF Flying Training School after graduating from the Egyptian Army College in November 1939, would feature prominently in the history of the REAF. They included several who played a significant role during the Palestine War of 1948–49. Amongst the latter was Muhammad Adli Kafafi who had been based at Manqabad, near Assyut in Upper Egypt after being commissioned as an officer. Here, on a desert hilltop overlooking the fertile Nile Valley, he and other young officers would spend part of almost every evening sipping hot sweet tea and discussing their country's future. However, Kafafi was only at Manqabad for a short time as he was amongst those selected for the REAF. Most of his friends – including *Mulazim Thani* (Second Lieutenant) Anwar Sadat – became army officers.

They nevertheless remained in touch and in a few cases the friendships established at the Military College formed the basis of what might be called political, though not as yet revolutionary, groups or cells within the Egyptian armed forces. The outbreak of war had, naturally enough, caused great excitement amongst these newly commissioned junior officers. Some saw it as an adventure, others as a means of advancing their military careers, while a few like Kafafi and Anwar Sadat thought that it might open up possibilities of real independence for their country.

Mulazim Thani Adli Kafafi soon found himself at the control of a Miles Magister at the REAF's FTS at Almaza. This was followed by the Avro 626 and Hawker 'Egyptian' Audax, but it was only when he received his pilot's wings in November 1940 that he received an Air Force rank as a *Tayyar Thani*, 'Second Pilot' or Pilot Officer. Another of this generation of cadets was Umar al-Shakib whose REAF career would in many ways mirror that of Adli Kafafi.

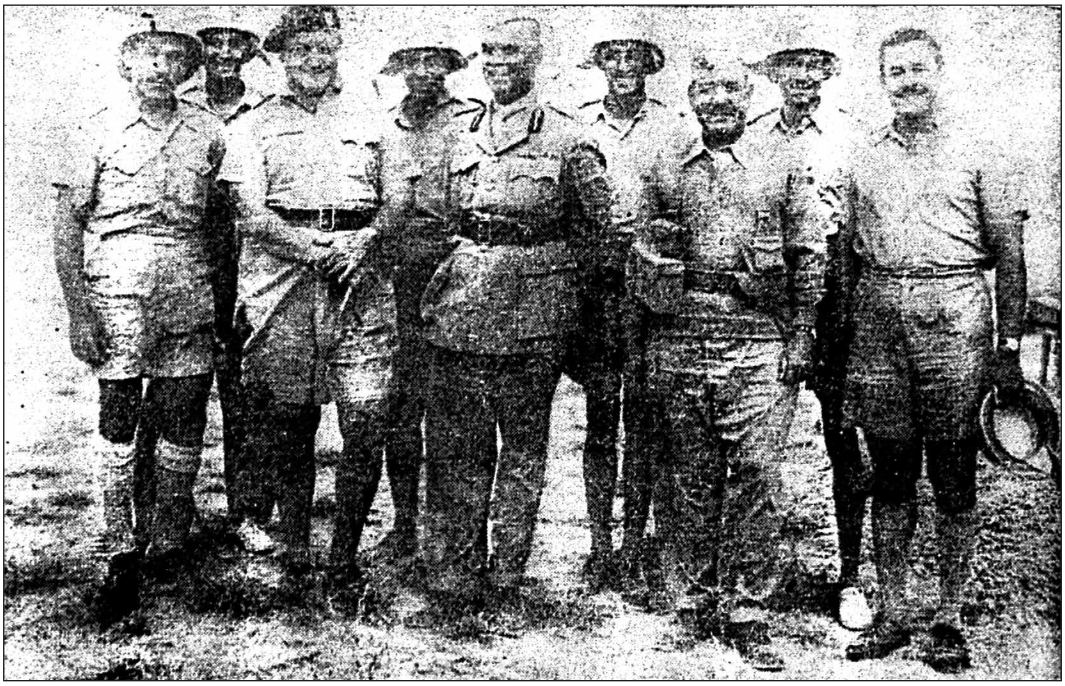
During the period of so-called Phoney War another young man, Frederick Weston of the RAF Advisory Mission attached to the REAF, had his attention diverted away from military duties – not by politics but by love. His story is, however, more than a mere romantic interlude, because it sheds interesting light on the social, cultural and political constraints of the time, and how they could be overcome. One day, early in the Second World War, when driving along the new tarmac desert road from Alexandria to Cairo, Fred Weston came across a car that had broken down far from any habitation. It belonged to a REAF cadet currently learning to fly at Almaza. On board was the cadet and his married sister. In 1939 it was dangerous to be stranded in the desert, even on a proper road, because local Bedouin occasionally robbed travellers, so Weston agreed to take the young lady back to her home in Heliopolis and to send help from the first garage he found. Meanwhile the cadet remained with his car.

Weston recalled that he was surprised to find that the cadet's sister was not only well educated and sophisticated but also had modern ideas – not at all fitting Fred Weston's expected stereotype of a married Egyptian woman. Surprise was followed by a brief 'romantic liaison' but unfortunately her other brother found out. The main problem seems to have been the difference in their social rank, because the young woman's family was from Egypt's governing Pasha class. The REAF cadet's brother and his friends therefore decided to punish Weston by putting him on a dangerous horse. But the Englishman could ride and survived this ordeal without broken bones or humiliation – thus considerably increasing his own status. This enabled the young British NCO to continue meeting his new lady-friend in Alexandria. In fact, Weston tried to arrange a divorce from his first wife (eventually succeeding in 1951). However, his girlfriend's husband was now due to return from England where he had studying to be a doctor, so the romance came to an end.

Air Chief Marshal Arthur Longmore greeting Abd al-Wahab Pasha in 1940 probably at Almaza. (Albert Grandolini collection)

REAF pilots in the Western Desert, probably from the Flight of No. 1 Squadron Lysanders based at Bahariya oasis which flew reconnaissance missions in support of Egyptian Army units defending the vast area south of the Qattara Depression during the early years of the Second World War. (Author's collection)

Though the REAF had gone to its war stations in September 1939, Egypt was not at war with Germany. At present there were still only four operational squadrons because No. 5 was not fully established. No. 1 Army Cooperation Squadron with Westland Lysanders was the first to be actively involved, both its Flights being equipped and



The Egyptian Minister of War *Fariq* (General) Ibrahim Attalah Pasha and a British advisor with officers of the REAF Lysander Flight stationed in the Western Desert in August 1940. (Author's collection)

trained for bombing as well as reconnaissance. One Flight moved to Suez with six Lysanders on 3 September. From there the crews started to fly twice-daily patrols over the northern part of the Gulf of Suez in cooperation with the Canal Defence HQ. The British naval authorities in Egypt were, in fact, seriously worried by the threat posed by enemy submarines to this vital strategic route.

One Lysander would fly 220 kilometres from Suez to al-Tur on the coast of Sinai in the late afternoon, returning to Suez early the following morning. At these times of day, the low angle of the sun was expected to make submarines or their periscopes more easily visible. Communication with Royal Navy and merchant ships in the approaches to the Suez Canal was by Aldis lamp, using codes which changed each day. The British Advisory Mission reported that such sorties were carried out efficiently and effectively. No. 1 Squadron lost no aircraft, either to enemy action or to accidents, and much was learned by the REAF while the Egyptians also proved their worth in British eyes.

A second Flight of No. 1 Squadron Lysanders, again with six aircraft, was sent to Bahariya oasis from where it flew regular reconnaissance missions up to 240 kilometres west of the landing ground in support of Egyptian Army units based in Bahariya and other Western Desert oases including Siwa. The existing landing ground had already been found too soft, with its surface breaking up under constant use, even when the Lysanders had softer, broader 'balloon tyres' designed for such conditions. So, two new airstrips had been cleared and these were used from September 1939 onwards. The existing airstrip at Siwa Oasis was located on higher ground, about 20 kilometres from the main settlement of Siwa because the sand immediately around the oasis was again too soft for regular landings and take-offs. Lysanders from No. 1 Squadron's Bahariya Flight were also sometimes based at Siwa and at Ma'tan Baqqush, a low-lying airstrip close to the aerodrome at al-Qasaba on the coast between Marsa Matruh and Fukah.

According to *Tayyar Thani* Ali Muhammad Labib, a junior pilot in No. 1 Squadron's Western Desert Flight, he and his colleagues flew regular reconnaissance sorties close to the Libyan frontier beyond which Italian forces were believed to be concentrating for a planned invasion of Egypt. The Lysander crews would monitor any infiltration into Egypt and then alert the British forces. Labib also maintained that the British High Command had planned to have the two Flights rotated between Suez and the Western Desert every three months. This, he suggests, was to give all the Lysander pilots, observers and ground crews equal experience of both environments and thus enhance their training. But when Italy did not immediately enter the war, No. 1 Squadron's Flight of Lysanders in the Western Desert were brought back to Almaza in October 1939 while the other Flight remained at Suez. Meanwhile the British advisor attached to No. 1 Squadron, who himself formed part of the RAF Advisory Mission, appears to have divided his time between Suez, Almaza and Bahariya.

The lack of enemy action now enabled the Egyptians to restructure their units in the Western Desert. A squadron of Egyptian Frontier Forces at Siwa had not been withdrawn, but in December 1939 the Egyptian Army's autonomous South-Western Force returned to the Bahariya and Siwa Oases, this time including light tanks and again supported by one Flight of No. 1 Squadron's Lysanders. Prince Isma'il Da'ud's habit of making tours of inspection dressed in old-fashioned cavalry uniform caused widespread amusement, but the British still regarded this commander of the South-Western Force as one of the Egyptian Army's best senior officers. Others were less impressed, including Ali Muhammad Labib of No. 1 Squadron. He, perhaps unfairly, described the Prince as trying to use a splendid uniform and a colourful retinue to hide his lack of modern technical knowledge. *Tayyar Thani* Labib described one such unannounced visit to No. 1 Squadron's Lysander Flight deep in the desert:

> One of his cavalry regiments [actually a small unit of light tanks] was stationed in the western desert where we were. One day we were surprised by his visit. He was accompanied by the chief commander of the armed forces [and said], 'I have taken advantage of my visit to this region to pay you a surprise inspection'. He invited us [aircrew] up to his camp tent for a dinner and we complied. The tent was furnished with expensive Persian rugs, silk decorative hangings, incense perfume and soft foreign music. My imagination took me to *One Thousand and One Nights*; the next thing I expected to see was the Princess Sheherazade surrounded by her handmaidens. The Prince's voice sounded harsh when he uttered Turkish, French and some Arabic words, it put a stop to my imagination, and in place of the fair maidens I saw male servants surrounding him. I indulged myself with the exquisite food which the Prince had provided, included the famous Western Desert gazelle. This was a sample of the high command scenario for such a place.

There were no such exotic interludes for the men of No. 2 (Fighter) Squadron at Hilwan Aerodrome where they had moved at the start of the war. Their Gladiators were tasked with defending Cairo against enemy air attack, but by early December one Flight of No. 2 Squadron Gladiators also appears to have been sent to Suez to defend the southern part of the Canal. No enemy attacks materialised, so No. 2 spent its time training and taking part in air defence exercises with British and Egyptian forces, some over Cairo, others over the Nile Delta. This would be followed in 1940 with a move to Dakhailah outside Alexandria, for affiliation exercises with the RAF.

Nor were the first years of the Second World War exotic or particularly exciting for No. 3 (Comm.) Squadron. Its available crews and aeroplanes were nevertheless busy ferrying government officials and senior officers around the country. Three additional Avro Ansons and two Percival Q.6s were expected, but had not arrived by November. The six ex-RAF Fairey Gordons of the REAF's Target Towing Flight seems to have been attached to No. 3 Squadron at this stage and, according to the British Advisory Mission Report of November 1939, had finally been supplied with two sets of towing gear by the RAF – but still lacked cables and targets to attach to this gear. Frustrated and perhaps almost in desperation, the REAF's workshops at Almaza set about making their own and by the start of 1940 the REAF's Target Towing Flight was at last able to tow targets for both British and Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries. As Ibrahim Gazerine wrote to the author in June 1973, 'We did receive three ex-Royal Navy Fairey Gordon drogue target aircraft…and they were used for fighter and Ack Ack training.'

Of the REAF's four operational squadrons at the start of the Second World War, No. 4 (Bomber) found itself in the most difficult situation, caught 'on the hop'. Between September and October 1939, 12 of No. 4's outdated 'Egyptian' Audaxes were transferred to the REAF's FTS to be used as much needed advanced training machines. This was done in the confident expectation of their replacement by Bristol Blenheims, 18 of which had been ordered and reportedly paid for. The new machines were due to arrive in October, but the outbreak of war resulted in them being diverted to the RAF. No. 4 Squadron therefore had to continue training as best it could on its remaining Audaxes plus some Avro 626s. Reportedly, this training now included reconnaissance and desert rescue work, in case British or Egyptian aircrew had to make forced landings or bale out over otherwise inaccessible terrain.

No. 5 (Fighter) Squadron was almost up to strength by November 1939 and was hard at work training its new and inexperienced Gladiator pilots, probably at Almaza. The CO of No. 5 Squadron already appears to have been *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Hassan Mahmud who, by the end of the Second World War, would emerge as perhaps the REAF's most highly regarded squadron commander in the opinions of both Egyptian and British military observers. Six of the squadron's Gladiator would move to Dakhailah by January 1940, with pilots being sent there – probably on rotation – for affiliation exercises with the RAF.

At the start of the war, Misr Airlines, Egypt's civil airline, was placed under the authority of the Ministry of War. Its contribution was expected to be in communications as well as cooperating with Egyptian and British anti-aircraft batteries and searchlights as they underwent intensive training. Another source also mentions casualty evacuation duties. However, things did not work as well as hoped and the British Advisory Mission reported that the REAF's new Director, *Liwa* (Brigadier) Abd al-Wahab, complained of being hampered at every turn by a lack of cooperation between Egypt's civil and military aviation authorities.

The so-called Phoney War was even quieter in Egypt than it was in France. Nevertheless, ordinary training was interrupted, and this was as true for the RAF squadrons in Egypt as it was for the REAF. For example, No. 208 (Army Coop.) moved to al-Qasaba a day or so before the actual outbreak because its primary task was to support the British Armoured Division's HQ. This move meant that No. 208 would find itself next door to several of the REAF's No. 1 Squadron Lysanders at nearby Ma'tan Baqqush, the British and Egyptian crews having recently trained on Lysanders at the same time at Almaza.

One result of these tense but quiet months was that the Egyptian squadrons lost several RAF advisors who were urgently needed elsewhere. This gave REAF officers greater responsibility, and thus greater experience, enabling the Advisory Mission Report of November 1939 to state that, '…they are showing progress in ability to command.' It had also been possible to renew work on a number of minor airfields, all of which were completed by the end of the year, with the notable exception of what would soon become the important frontline aerodrome at Marsa Matruh where work had been abandoned.

It has been suggested that 1940 saw the accident rate in the REAF increase as a result of poor airmanship and a lack of flying discipline, resulting in a dwindling number of available aeroplanes. However, primary sources such as the frequent Reports of the British Advisory Mission do not support this interpretation. The proportion of serviceable aeroplanes, compared to the total number, did decrease but this was due to a shortage of spares at a time when the needs of the RAF took priority.

The only significant change to the organisational and command structures of the REAF was the creation of a new Air HQ at Abbasiya at the end of 1939. Meanwhile, most squadrons still had their headquarters at Almaza or Suez though there was a Station HQ at Dakhailah. Hassan Abd al-Wahab was considered 'excellent' by the British who regarded him as perhaps the strictest disciplinarian amongst senior Egyptian officers. Abd al-Wahab may also have felt relief when Misr Airlines was returned to civilian control in April 1940, having long been frustrated by a lack of cooperation on the part of Egypt's civil aviation authorities. Nevertheless, Misr Airlines was still called upon to assist in the training of the Egyptian Army's anti-aircraft gun and searchlight crews.

While *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia may have had overall responsibility for the REAF's two fighter squadrons, problems arose from the fact that all units were commanded by quite junior officers. Indeed, one squadron was for a while led by a *Tayyar Awal* (Flying Officer) at a time when no British RAF officer was available to supervise and advise him. On 31 March 1940, the British Advisory Mission reported that the REAF's total strength now consisted of 36 Gladiators, 18 Lysanders, one civil and three military Ansons (in reality the Avro 652 plus three Anson Mk.1s), 24 'Egyptian' Audaxes, 18 Avro 626s, 43 Magisters, six Gordons, two Moths and two Percival Q.6s, making a total of 151 aircraft.

Amongst the very few Egyptian official documents from this period to have been made available for research was some confidential correspondence between the Egyptian Minister of War and *Liwa* Abd al-Wahab, Director of the REAF. On 7 of May 1940, the Minister asked the Director about the real state of the REAF. Two days later the Director replied that 57 fighting aeroplanes were available but 24 of these were currently unserviceable – that was over 42 percent. It would thus appear that Abd al-Wahab regarded only

Squadron personnel lined up in front of one of their Bristol Blenheim Type 142M light bomber, probably in Egypt but possibly in Iraq or India. This photograph is said to have been taken in 1940, but the fact that the underneath of the aircraft is black with large white serial numbers might suggest 1939 or even shortly before the outbreak of war. (Woodroffe family archive)

the Gladiators, Lysanders and Ansons as 'fighting aeroplanes'. He also told the Minister that the REAF currently had 73 pilots trained to fly such aeroplanes, 19 of whom were non-commissioned officers.

A week or so after this confidential correspondence, the REAF at last received some additions to its inventory. Sadly, they only consisted of 12 (14 according to one source) old, ex-RAF, ex-Royal South African Air Force and ex-Royal Rhodesian Air Force, Hawker Harts intended for training and communications duties. These included at least three different versions and all retained their RAF serial numbers while being given Egyptian national markings. Those which are known include a Hawker Hart SEDB Single Engine Day Bomber (K4442) built in 1934–35 and previously used by No. 33 Squadron (RAF) based at Ismailia. There was also a Hawker Hart Trainer designed for a temperate climate (K3154) and a Hawker Hart Trainer (Trop.) with a tropical radiator (K5032). Reportedly all could only be used in winter because they had not been modified to cope with the intense heat and dust of an Egyptian summer, though this may in fact have excluded machines such as the Hart Trainer (Trop.) number K5032. As summer was now approaching, they were of little immediate use so, with no real help from an increasingly overstretched RAF, REAF technicians began work on the required modifications, though with only partial success.

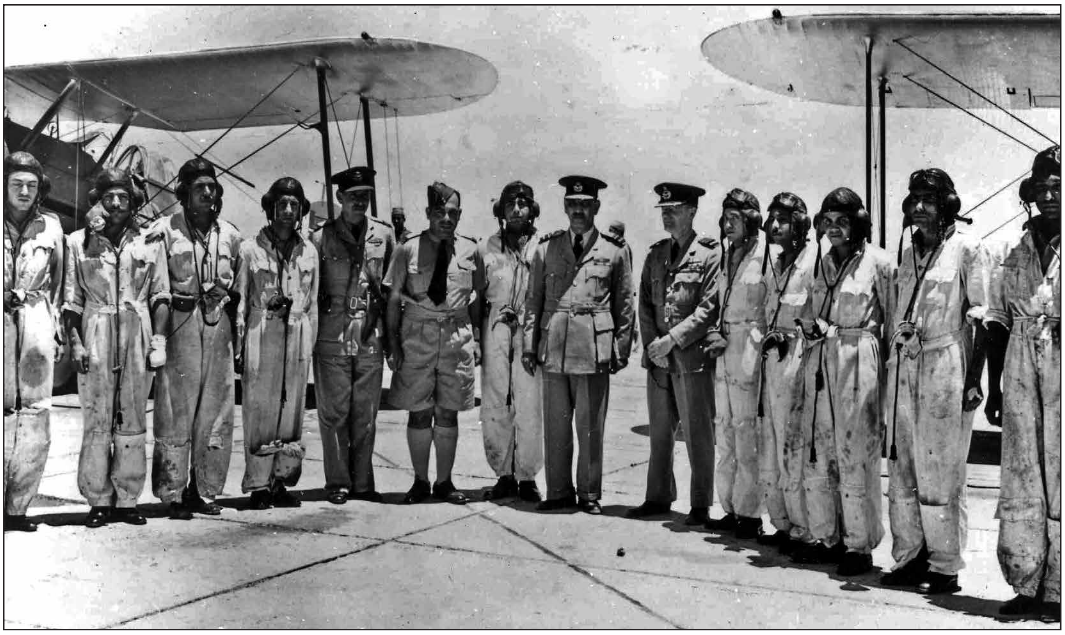
Even less useful were a pair of Hungarian light aircraft. In an ill-advised attempt to strengthen Egypt's air force, King Faruq purchased two MSrE M-24 single-engine, single-seater 'touring' aeroplanes. The King is unlikely to have thought they might be added to his Royal Flight, unless he seriously believed that he would learn to fly them himself. Designed and built by students at the *Műegyetemi Sportrepülő Egyesület* (Air Club of the University of Technical Sciences) in Budapest and powered by a 105hp MAVAG-Hirth HM.504A-2 engine, the M-24 appeared a quite advanced design with a fully enclosed cockpit and a fully retractable undercarriage. The first two machines to be constructed were sent to Egypt just as Germany invaded France, with only five ever being built. Italy also declared war, followed by Hungary which formally entered as an ally of the Axis powers in April 1941. This meant that no further spares or supporting equipment could be acquired. Delivered to Egypt by air with the temporary Hungarian civil registrations HA-BAA and HA-BAB, the two M-24s were sent to No. 3 Squadron for communications purposes but, according to Ibrahim Hassan Gazerine who was then one of the REAF's most skilled engineers 'their performance was very poor indeed and they were not of much use to the Air Force.'

Urgings by the British Advisory Mission that the money spent on Egypt's new Territorial Army would better be used to expand the REAF and frontline units of the army, were largely ignored. Consequently, the Egyptian Ministry of War soon found itself short of funds. Plans published in April 1940 to establish two new fighter squadrons, expanding the REAF to seven operational formations, were soon drastically reduced. Almost worse was the fact that only a small part of the spares and other material purchased from the British for the REAF had yet arrived. In fact, Egyptian government documents show that, of the over £6,700,000 worth of equipment ordered, only £1,170,000 had been delivered by April 1940.

Meanwhile REAF units carried on as best they could with what they already had. According to some sources, the Avro 626s which had been transferred to the Flying Training School at Almaza were painted overall trainer yellow during the Second World War. However, this is likely to have been done later in the conflict, after the machines' deteriorating fabric was replaced. Despite ongoing complaints about a shortage of spares, the situation seems to have improved where the FTS's Miles Magisters were concerned, so at least the elementary training programme could go ahead. Even so, problems remained with the Magisters' fuel systems, in particular with their carburettors, despite the best efforts of Fred Weston and his Egyptian colleagues.

Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid's logbook from January 1940, his final month at the FTS, includes the name of a new flying instructor, Warrant Officer Sidell of the RAF Advisory Mission. However, Abu Zaid's final flight at the FTS, in the 'Egyptian' Audax K517 on 28 January 1940 was with the same instructor who had taken him up for the first time in Magister L218 on 22 February 1939. This was *Tayyar Awal* Muhammad Hassan al-Maghribi. Al-Magribi had proved himself one of the most effective flying instructors in the REAF and would, later in 1940, be sent on an RAF course where he was taught how to instruct instructors, achieving an A1 Pass in the process. After a long career in the Egyptian Air Force, Muhammad Hassan al-Maghribi eventually retired with the rank of *Qa'id Liwa Jawi* (Group Captain) on the Military Staff.

The intake of flying cadets who received their wings at Almaza early in 1940 included a numbered of significant individuals. One such was, of course, Muhammad Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid who graduated as a *Tayyar Thani* (Pilot Officer) on 17 January at the age of 22. He was immediately sent to the recently formed No. 5 Squadron, flying Gladiators. Two other graduates who were sent to fly Gladiators in 1940, either in January or November, were Ali Sabri



The REAF's No. 2 Fighter Squadron being inspected by Air Chief Marshal Longmore of the RAF at Suez, 14 June 1940, with their CO Flight Lieutenant Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia (wearing side cap), Wing Commander Muhammad Abd al-Muna'im al-Miqaati and Air Commodore Hassan Abd al-Wahab Pasha the director of the REAF. Partially visible are two of No. 2 Squadron's Gloster Gladiators. (EAF Museum)

and Abd al-Latif Baghdadi; the latter going to No. 2 Squadron. Ali Sabri's first squadron remains unclear but he is said to have been a flying instructor at the FTS in 1941.

Sa'ad al-Din Sharif had his first flight at the FTS in January 1940 and graduated in November that year. He was sent to No. 3 (Comm.) Squadron and later volunteered to serve in the RAF's No. 216 Transport and Ferry Group (see Volume 8). Another pilot who joined the FTS at the start of the year and graduated in November 1940 was Adli Kafafi who then went to No. 4 Squadron. Muhammad Farag may also have received his wings in 1940, before similarly being sent to No. 4 (Bomb.) Squadron. This graduation ceremony would normally have been around the same time as the arrival of a new intake from the Army's Military College, though it could also be the following January.

Meanwhile, the FTS's aeroplanes were being used by more senior, but generally 'desk bound' officers like *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Hassan Tawfiq for refresher courses. His logbook shows that in June 1940, having returned from England, he flew Magisters, Avro 626s and an 'Egyptian' Audax (serial number K500). Later, in September that year, Hassan Tawfiq was back at Almaza, and despite his earlier accident, his total flying time now stood at 756 hours, 50 minutes. From 17 to 24 September, Hassan Tawfiq flew both solo and with Pilot Officer Humphreys of the Advisory Mission in a number of Magisters. This would be followed by a solo in the old Gipsy Moth (number E106) on 12 October and a flight with *Tayyar Awwal* Hassib in another Magister on 23 December. It is interesting to note that this page of Tawfiq's logbook was signed by *Qa'id Janah* (Wing Commander) Abd al-Muna'im al-Miqaati, currently the CO of Almaza, and brought his flying time up to 767 hours, 40 minutes of which 658 hours, 25 minutes were solo.

The lack of enemy activity threatening shipping in the Gulf of Suez during 1939 enabled the Suez Flight of No. 1 Squadron to be temporarily used for other purposes. The forward airfield at al-Tur was also said to have needed repair. So, as the RAF took over responsibility for the Gulf of Suez patrols in January 1940, the Lysanders of No. 1 Squadron under their CO, *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Salih Muhammad Salih, moved back to Almaza to train for one of the REAF's most ambitious missions yet attempted. This would be a flight in February by two Ansons of No. 3 Squadron to the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, accompanied by nine of No. 1 Squadron's Lysanders – half of the squadron's total strength. Aboard the Ansons were the Egyptian Prime Minister and Minister of Defence.

No British personnel were involved in this operation which went virtually without a hitch, except that one Lysander suffered engine trouble and had to make an emergency landing at Khartoum. Thereafter the Egyptian Lysanders remained in Sudan for a while, flying liaison and communications missions as far south as Juba (now capital of the Republic of South Sudan) near the Ugandan frontier, before returning to normal duties in Egypt. The whole expedition was primarily a political gesture by the Egyptian government, which regarded the Sudan as Egyptian territory though it was currently governed by an Anglo–Egyptian Condominium. On the other hand, it also provided useful and demanding training for the personnel of Nos. 1 and 3 Squadrons.

April 1940 saw No. 1 Squadron again cooperating with the British Army and Royal Navy during exercises around Almaza and Suez. The squadron was still regarded by the British as the best in the REAF, but on 9 May a confidential report from the REAF's Director, *Liwa* Hassan Abd al-Wahab, to the Egyptian Minister of War stated that No. 1 Squadron was down to 15 Lysanders, seven of which were currently unserviceable, and had 22 officer pilots.

Eight days later the Minister responded by asking *Liwa* Hassan Abd al-Wahab about the Air Force's plans. He was told that the RAF had agreed that REAF squadrons would be dispersed in the case of an enemy assault, meaning that No. 1 Squadron's A Flight would move back to Suez from Almaza while B Flight went from Almaza to Dakhailah. The following month a Flight of Lysanders was, in fact, at Dakhailah while also sending small numbers of its aeroplanes to the unfinished forward aerodrome at Marsa Matruh. There they would have found their neighbours at al-Qasaba were, at times, the Lysanders of No. 208 Squadron RAF. The latter had other detachments at Sidi Barrani and in the open desert at Bir Kanayis which lay 65 kilometres south-west of Marsa Matruh, and at Siwa Oasis.

At the start of 1940, No. 2 (Fighter) Squadron lost several of its more experienced personnel to other units, leaving the commander with too many newcomers. Furthermore, it was suffering from a growing shortage of spares for its Gladiators – a situation which would only get worse. No. 2's Flights appear to have been further divided by the need to prepare for affiliation exercises with the British RAF. By April, part of the squadron was already at Dakhailah for these exercises, though it is unclear whether the other part was still at Hilwan aerodrome to protect Cairo. Although the squadron as a whole was back up to full strength, a confidential report sent by the REAF's Director to the Minister of War on 7 May stated that No. 2 would be going from Dakhailah to Almaza, apparently implying that the entire squadron would do so, though not necessarily all at the same time. Other sources indicate that part or all of No. 2 would go to Hilwan, either directly or via Almaza. Abd al-Wahab's memo of 9 May added that No. 2 Squadron currently had 18 Gladiators, seven of which were unserviceable, 16 officer pilots and nine NCO pilots.

At the start of 1940, No. 3 Squadron had been redesignated as a Bomber-Transport unit with three Ansons. These were currently being used for training on twin-engine aeroplanes, pending the arrival of the much-desired Blenheims. The supposed 'crew training' on Avro Ansons actually involved active participation in anti-submarine patrols over the northern part of the Red Sea. This was presumably the reality behind Air Vice Marshal Miqaati's statement to the author in 1971 that the involvement of Egyptian Ansons in patrols south of Suez was 'hidden from our government' by being classified as training sorties. The fact that No. 3 Squadron was not mentioned in *Liwa* Abd al-Wahab's list of units to be dispersed, also indicates that the squadron headquarters would remain in Almaza. In April No. 3 Squadron received three more Avro Anson Mk Is which had originally been built for the RAF but, no longer being needed, were made available for export. In REAF service they are believed to have retained their original RAF serial numbers, N9648, N9657 and N9666 rather than being given numbers following those of Egypt's first Ansons. This would also apply to most other ex-RAF machines handed over to Egypt during the Second World War.

The Egyptian Royal Flight still formed part of No. 3 Squadron in 1940 and its most important, though perhaps not its only, aeroplanes were a pair of recently arrived Percival Q.6s. Various problems were immediately experienced with these aircraft, the worst being overheating in the desert climate. This was eventually cured by *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Gazerine who fitted them with tropical oil coolers taken from other aeroplanes. Thereafter the Royal Q.6s played their part in the war effort as communications aircraft, normally flown by *Qa'id Asrab* (Squadron Leader) Ibrahim Hakki, CO of No. 3 Squadron and the Royal Flight.

Though Fred Weston of the British Advisory Mission was currently attached to the REAF's FTS, he also had close dealing with Ibrahim Hakki. Towards the end of May 1940, following the German invasion of France and when the British Expeditionary Force was falling back towards the Channel ports, Hakki came to the same conclusion as many people across the world – namely that Britain, like France, would soon be defeated. Weston recalled how, as they were walking across the tarmac checking the work of the squadron, Hakki turned to Weston and said, 'I will have you in prison in about three weeks' time!' He apparently expected that the Egyptians would throw the British out and arrest the Advisory Mission. Although Hakki spoke without animosity, these were unsettling times for Egypt and its ruler, so the Royal Flight kept a duty ground crew on standby after working hours and throughout the night. The Advisory Mission similarly kept one man on duty on Almaza aerodrome HQ for the same period. Weston further recalled that Ibrahim Hakki seemed frightened of King Faruq, terrified of not having one of the Royal Flight aeroplanes ready at a moment's notice but at the same time remaining reluctant to ask for Weston's technical help until a situation became critical.

No. 4 Squadron was nominally a bomber unit but was in no state to bomb any enemies. Its remaining archaic 'Egyptian' Audaxes were currently based at Dakhailah where the squadron trained as best it could and awaited the promised Blenheims. These, it seems, were still expected according to the Advisory Mission Report of April 1940. In May, No. 4 Squadron had six Audaxes, two of which were unserviceable; five officer pilots, one of whom is believed to have been Mustafa Mahir, plus four NCO Pilots. According to the dispersal plan agreed between the Egyptians and British, No. 4 Squadron would remain at Dakhailah in the event of an emergency. Their work was sometimes associated with those Egyptian Army units based in the northern coastal area of the Western Desert, and reached as far as Marsa Matruh. Although some of the more nationalistic members of No. 4 Squadron were unhappy about seeming to work hand-in-glove with British 'occupiers', their duties did enable them to observe a great deal of the British positions, facilities, stores and fuel dumps in this part of Egypt.

Newly-formed No. 5 (Fighter) Squadron had 18 Gladiators at the start of 1940 and was under the command of *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Hassan Mahmud, now apparently with Warrant Officer Humphrey of the RAF as his resident British advisor. These men were completing their training at Dakhailah but had yet to start affiliation exercises with the RAF. Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid's first flight in his new squadron was on 31 January in Gladiator number L9037 and lasted 50 minutes. Abu Zaid's Flight Commander was *Tayyar Thani* (Pilot Officer) Afifi; perhaps Gamal al-Din Afifi, who was one of the Egyptian Air Force's most senior officers in 1967, or Sa'id Afifi al-Ganzuri, who was shot down and killed during the Palestine War of 1948.

No. 5 Squadron's sorties took its aircraft at least as far west Daba'a. On 16 March Abu Zaid went up in 'Egyptian' Audax K403 with Warrant Officer Humphrey on what seems to have been a final check before the young Egyptian was sent on his first active patrol. This took off at 1040 hours on 21 March 1940 in Gladiator number N5762. From then until the Italian declaration of war on 10th June, Abu Zaid – and presumably other pilots of his squadron – flew almost every day, sometimes twice, landing and taking off from various airfields. His logbook listed such sorties as 'patrols', 'formation patrolling', 'XC formation to Gabaa' (probably an error for Daba'a), 'forced landing', 'formation fighter attack', 'patrol and interception', 'FCG [Fighter or Fire Control Group] air-to-ground training' on the day after Germany invaded France on 10 May 1940, 'XC formation from Dakhailah to Suez', and 'air firing air-to-ground' which was first mentioned on 29 May.

Abu Zaid did not fly on 10 June, the day that Italy declared war, but the following day his logbook recorded 'Formation from Almaza to Suez' which took off at 0805; he himself flying Gladiator L9041. This was followed by a very busy day on 12 June, with two sorties in Gladiator N5755 'formation flying and interception', an unspecified morning flight in Gladiator L9033 which may actually have been inserted into the logbook hurriedly and out of sequence (the handwriting is unclear), and a 'Search for lost machine' in Gladiator L9033 which might similarly have been misdated. There was even a flight in Egyptian Audax K403 (perhaps the squadron hack) with a British advisor officer whose handwritten name appeared in the logbook as 'W/C Coote'. Initially misinterpreted as a previously unmentioned 'W/O or Warrant Officer Coote', it now appears that Squadron Leader Coote had been promoted to the rank of Wing Commander. Abu Zaid then had a deserved rest before taking to the air again in Gladiator L9031 on the last day of June.

As anticipated in *Liwa* Abd al-Wahab's message to the Egyptian Minister of War on 17 May, No. 5 Squadron moved from Dakhailah to Suez in June, probably via Almaza according to the evidence of Abu Zaid's logbook. Other sources indicate that No. 5 Squadron actually moved a number of times during the rest of 1940, taking part in joint training exercises with No. 1 Squadron in July, being based at Almaza in August with training sorties to what appears to the REAF's main firing range near Dahshur south of Cairo, and perhaps back to Suez in September. What is clear is that the highly esteemed *Qa'id Sirb* Hassan Mahmud was in command of the squadron throughout this period, assisted by Warrant Officer Humphrey of the RAF.

Meanwhile, having been returned to civilian control, Misr Airlines was not mentioned again during the first part of 1940 though it was probably busy carrying VIPs around Egypt and the Levant. Before the Italian declaration of war upon Britain and France, the year 1940 had been relatively quiet for Egypt and the REAF. In April, however, Group Captain Victor Hubert Tait, the Air Advisor to the Egyptian Ministry of War, was informed that he was needed back in Britain. The Egyptian government did not want to see him go and offered Tait a considerably increased salary but, as Tait told the author, 'patriotic reasons' meant that he had to leave. Having set sail in May, wartime conditions made Group Captain Tait's journey to England slow and he only reached London the day before Germany invaded France. As he described the situation to the author: 'All hell then broke loose and nobody had time to put me in the picture.'

Air Chief Marshal Longmore of the RAF inspecting the REAF's No. 2 Squadron and its Gloster Gladiators at Suez on 14 June 1940. The unit CO, Flight Lieutenant Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia might be acting as interpreter, while Longmore is also accompanied by Wing Commander Muhammad Abd al-Muna'im al-Miqaati and Hassan Abd al-Wahab Pasha, here wearing the uniform of an Air Vice Marshal. (EAF Museum collection)

Meanwhile, there continued to be tension between Egypt and Britain and on 30 April, little more than a week before the German blitzkrieg against France, the Egyptian Prime Minister Ali Mahir Pasha announced that: 'Nothing would be more welcome to the government than the withdrawal of foreign forces from the soil of Egypt in the shortest possible time.' He also said that the conditions for achieving this were to make the Egyptian Army strong enough to defend the strategically vital Suez Canal and to be able to act 'in the fullest good faith with Egypt's allies', by which Ali Mahir meant the United Kingdom.

This period nevertheless witnessed an embarrassing incident when Abd al-Hamid al-Dighaydi was court-martialled for bribery, intrigue, gambling and various other infringements of discipline. 'Dighaydi al-Kabir' (Big Dighaydi) as he was known, was again sent to the infantry as a punishment – this time permanently. Several years earlier, Victor Hubert Tait had warned his successor as Director of the REAF, Ali Islam Bey, not to accept the volatile Abd al-Hamid al-Dighaydi back into the Air Force following an earlier court-martial. In fact, there were two prominent officers named Dighaydi in the REAF and its successors, the EAF and UARAF. Whether or not they were related is unknown, but the older of the two, Abd al-Hamid al-Dighaydi was therefore nick-named 'Dighaydi al-Kabir' (Big Dighaydi) while the younger was known as 'Dighaydi al-Sughayr' (Small Dighaydi).

Despite his disciplinary failings, the older al-Dighaydi remained in the Egyptian military and served as a notably successful infantry battalion commander against the Israelis during the Palestine War 1948. Abd al-Salim Dighaydi, or 'Dighaydi al-Sughayr' spent his entire career in the Egyptian Air Force and was in a senior position as General Officer Commanding the Canal Zone Region or the Eastern Defence Region/Sinai during the 1967 war with Israel. In the aftermath of Egypt's catastrophic defeat in this conflict, he was one of those officers unfairly punished for supposed dereliction of duty.

In May 1940, the two REAF fighter squadrons were placed under the operational command of the RAF's No. 252 Fighter Wing. This had been formed at the start of the war with its headquarters at Fort Shafrakhanah, a substantial military barracks next to Dakhailah Aerodrome on the south-western edge of Alexandria. Its role was the protection of Cairo, the Nile Delta and Suez Canal against enemy air attacks. To start with, the only squadrons in No. 252 Fighter Wing were the RAF's No 80 (Gladiator) and No. 112 which had been in the Sudan without aircraft until it also received Gladiators and was sent to Egypt in June 1939. The first officer to command this Fighter Wing was Wing Commander C.B.S. Spackman, previously Officer Commanding RAF Hilwan, but on 8 May 1940, around the same time that the two REAF Gladiator squadrons were incorporated into No. 252 Fighter Wing, a well-known Canadian fighter pilot took over. This was Wing Commander Joseph Fall who had been credited with 36 victories while serving in the British Royal Naval Air Service and RAF during the First World War. Almost exactly a month later a new, if seemingly temporary, Wing Headquarters was established in what was called Seagull Camp at al-Miaks, between Alexandria and Dakhailah Aerodrome.

In Egypt, the Italian declaration of war had an immediate and profound effect upon the relationship between the RAF and the REAF. The supposedly anti-British General Aziz al-Masri had already wanted the Egyptians to take advantage of Britain's more favourable attitude towards the Egyptian armed forces by working as closely as possible with the British, thus getting better training and a more direct access to vital spares. Unfortunately, the REAF

A Gloster Gladiator of the REAF preparing to take off from a dusty desert airfield, published on the front page of the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* on 6 December 1939. The lack of Egyptian national markings on its rudder suggests that this machine was part of No. 5 Sq REAF. (EAF Museum, Cairo)

was stopped from pursuing such a policy by the attitude of the current Egyptian government.

Furthermore, there were some in the REAF who were reluctant to fight alongside those they regarded as 'occupiers', especially as they were painfully aware of the limitations of their own training and equipment. One of the more experienced amongst them, Muhammad Faisal Abd al-Mun'im, summed up their reluctance:

> They [the British] tell us, stand and fight, but where are our pilots? Only 25% are trained to war, while the rest of the pilots have not yet trained in night fighting, or in air combat. They have little experience of air-to-air firing, or air-to-ground firing. And where are the spare parts for our planes? That was when they [the British] opened their stores for us, so I and Wagih Abaza went secretly to Aziz al-Masri [who had not yet fully retired as Chief of Staff until August 1940]. Hassan Izzat [who also went to General al-Masri], explained how Aziz al-Masri encouraged them to take whatever they needed from the RAF and to train well and to get prepared because that would have a significant result [for Egypt] […] Aziz al-Masri met with the Director of Army Operations and the Director of Munitions, but the Chief of Staff [Aziz al-Masri] found that he was the only one in the Egyptian Army to follow this path. The result was the cancellation of this effort [General al-Masri was finally removed from his post in August, paradoxically on British insistence], so our aeroplanes [the two Gladiator squadrons] were returned to Suez and Hilwan [where their role was only] to defend Egyptian forces alone.

Similarly, Prime Minister Ali Mahir was dismissed in June – his policy of offering maximum practical military assistance to the British short of declaring war on Britain's enemies 'in order to spare Egypt the scourge of war' having satisfied almost no one.

On 10 June 1940, six days after the British completed the famous withdrawal of their battered forces from Dunkirk, Italy declared war upon France and the United Kingdom, 'stabbing France in the back' in Provence but taking no action on the frontier between Libya and Egypt. It is also important to note that the often-overlooked Operation Aerial continued to evacuate British troops from other, more westerly parts of the French coast between 15 and 25 June 1940, and that only three days before the end of this operation the French government finally signed an armistice agreement with Germany, thus ending the Battle of France.

In all likelihood, Mussolini's government had hoped that the British would agree an armistice, as the French were soon to do, and therefore avoid an immediate confrontation between Italian and British forces in Africa. In fact, it was the British RAF which took the initiative, when Pilot Officer Hardiman flew the first mission of the Desert War in a Lysander of No. 208 Squadron during the night of 10–11 June 1940. At that time the main part of No. 208 was still at al-Qasaba, with detachments at Sidi Barrani, Bir Kanayis in the desert 65 kilometres south-west of Marsa Matruh (where in 1964 the author found an RAF button close to the track leading to Siwa), and at Siwa Oasis itself.

The following day, Egyptian troops in positions around Marsa Matruh were ordered to act defensively and only to obey orders which came directly from the Ministry of War in Cairo – in other words not to accept orders from any British officers. Similarly, the REAF, which was mostly at its war stations, was ordered to continue with what it was currently doing and under no circumstances to cross the Libyan frontier. It is now clear that the majority of REAF personnel were eager to take an active role in defence of their country. In fact, the idea that the willingness of the two Egyptian Gladiator squadrons to take part in interceptions was 'extremely questionable', as stated in a recent history of the desert air war, was based on prejudiced British documentation rather than on Egyptian documentary or verbal sources.

Activity in the Egyptian Parliament remained lively, especially on 11 and 12 June during debates about precisely what Egypt should do now that Italy had entered the conflict. Prime Minister Ali Mahir pointed out that although the Anglo–Egyptian Treaty did not oblige Egypt to declare war, the country should break off diplomatic relations with Italy as it had already done with Germany. He also maintained that Egypt would only go to war if Italy invaded Egypt, if Italian aircraft or naval vessels attacked Egyptian cities, or if the Italians attacked the Egyptian Army. In the event all these eventualities took place, but the Egyptian government still did not declare war, largely because Britain considered the myth of Egyptian neutrality to be beneficial to its war effort – at least at this stage.

Having taken the initiative in the air and when the Royal Navy subsequently bombarded the Libyan coast, the British then did the same on the ground, with British Army units crossing the frontier into Libya on 14 June, long before Italian Army units crossed in the opposite direction. It was not until 14 and 15 June that Italian aircraft finally crossed the Egyptian frontier to attack military positions in and around Sollum. This prompted the Egyptian authorities to issue a series of orders on the 15th, resulting in Egyptian military units evacuating Sidi Barrani, and Frontier Forces patrols pulling back from the immediate frontier while the handful of 'Egyptian' Audaxes were similarly withdrawn from Siwa Oasis. Meanwhile Egyptian forces in the Sudan took up defensive positions. In the Egyptian Parliament some opposition politicians pointed out that these orders went against what the Prime Minister had said only days earlier, but nothing more was done.

Rather than being a response to a French request for an armistice, as has often been claimed, it seems more likely that the Egyptian government's orders were a response to the British offensive on the frontier which had been carried out without informing the Egyptians beforehand. This British offensive was, of course, contrary to the Egyptian government's declared preference for the minimum possible military action. It had also endangered Egyptian units close to the Libyan frontier. Indeed, it has been suggested that offensive actions by the RAF and the Royal Navy were designed to goad the Italians into invading Egypt where the British plan – with Egyptian agreement – was based upon luring the enemy eastwards towards Marsa Matruh where they would meet a counter-strike by the British 7th Armoured Division.

Seen in this context, the withdrawal of Egyptian forces from the frontier and the REAF Audaxes from Siwa was within the overall pre-agreed plan. Elsewhere, No. 4 Squadron REAF's 'Egyptian' Audaxes continued to support the Egyptian troops in their new positions, while RAF units did the same in support of British troops. Siwa, however, was not abandoned by the Egyptians or by the British. It was far too important as the lynch pin of the Egyptian Air Observation Line across the Western Desert, upon which the RAF and the British Army depended for advance warning of enemy air attacks.

In June 1940 the Egyptian Minister of War clarified his government's position in a speech to the Army General Staff, stating that British military advisors must only offer advice, never give orders. Furthermore, REAF squadrons should not operate from the same airfields as British units or, if they had to, they should avoid being seen to do so. In practice several major aerodromes continued to be shared, though in each case the British and Egyptian facilities were located as far apart as practicable. For the Egyptian government it was essential that the REAF would not be under British command. In practice, however, the REAF's Commanding Officer, *Liwa* Hassan Abd al-Wahab, did place some squadrons or flights under effective RAF operational control, to the extent that a significant number of REAF aeroplanes had RAF squadron code letters painted on their fuselages.

In reality, the author believes, it was a case of the Egyptian government turning a blind eye rather than of the REAF High Command disobeying orders from its own government. Nevertheless, it remains true that the Egyptian government under Prime Minister Ali Mahir did try to freeze any further expansion of the British Advisory Mission which had grown considerably during the immediate pre-war period. Seen from the British point of view, the situation looked baffling and annoying, with the Egyptian Royal Palace and many politicians remaining studiously neutral if not occasionally hostile, while the Egyptian Army, the REAF and the civil service generally assisted the Allies.

The Egyptian government also wanted Cairo to be declared an open city, as Paris had been during the final days of the Battle of France, in order to avoid destruction by aerial bombardment. This was unacceptable to the British who persuaded the Egyptian authorities to order their anti-aircraft batteries and searchlights to engage Axis aeroplanes. The Egyptian Civil Defence and Fire Services were soon involved, not only in civilian areas but also in assisting British forces around harbours such as Alexandria, Suez and Port Said when these came under Italian and subsequently German air attack. Ali Mahir's apparent prevarication finally led to his dismissal by King Faruq – under considerable British pressure – on 28 June 1940. This was followed by the Egyptian Chief of the General Staff, General Aziz al-Masri being pensioned off, further annoying his supporters within the REAF, though he remained in post until early August when he was persuaded to take permanent sick leave. Meanwhile the Egyptian government's first budget of 1940 still envisaged the establishment of two more fighter squadrons, despite the fact that this was now unrealistic and would soon be shelved.

Between 10 June and 13 September 1940, when Italian ground forces crossed the frontier into Egypt, the REAF remained active in the Western Desert. For example, some of No. 1 Squadron's Lysanders were initially at Marsa Matruh. This formed the north-western terminal of the air observation line manned by the Egyptian Army, which ran south to Siwa Oasis and which watched for Italian air incursions. On 10 June, a Flight of six Lysanders from No. 1 Squadron was sent to cooperate with the new Egyptian Army Mobile Force operating in the Western Desert under *Qa'im Maqam* (Lieutenant Colonel) Prince Isma'il Da'ud, a cousin of King Faruk – though he was habitually at daggers-drawn with the monarch. This was initially based at al-Qasaba, south-east of Marsa Matruh, from where it could support the Egyptian garrison in Siwa. Like other Egyptian positions in the Western Desert, Marsa Matruh, al-Qasaba and Siwa were frequently bombed by the Italians while there were several clashes on the ground between Egyptian and Italian frontier patrols.

Though these Lysanders flew reconnaissance patrols and communications flights, they never had cause to fire their guns in anger. For example, Umar al-Shakib served in No. 1 Squadron from 2 July 1940 until 3 June 1943 as a *Tayyar Thani* (Pilot Officer) and then as a *Tayyar Awal* (Flying Officer), but throughout this time saw no active combat. Meanwhile he kept clear of political involvement and was not one of those REAF officers who would be disciplined during the crisis of 1942. In fact, it seems that no one from No. 1 Squadron was involved in that scandal.

No. 4 Squadron REAF had sent a Flight of 'Egyptian' Audaxes to Siwa, probably from Dakhailah, to support the southern end of the air observation line. They were led by *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Ibrahim Gazerine but after a brief stay they were ordered to withdraw to Almaza because the airstrip, located on higher ground several kilometres from Siwa Oasis, was considered indefensible. Thus, on 15 June, Gazerine brought his Flight back to Cairo.

The REAF's two fighter squadrons equipped with Gloster Gladiator biplanes were not involved in the Western Desert. Their role was to protect the Egyptian heartlands, along with partial responsibility for defending the Suez Canal. The first Italian night bombing raid against the Royal Naval base in Alexandria was carried out on 22 June 1940. Like subsequent attacks on both Alexandria and Suez, it was launched from Italian Air Force bases in the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea. It was a relatively brief, small-scale affair involving 12 lumbering three-engine, fixed undercarriage Savoia SM.81s of the *39th Stormo BT* (Terrestrial Bomber) which took off from Gadurra in Rhodes in the early hours of the 22nd.

British fighter pilots of No. 80 Squadron scrambled but saw nothing and were themselves fired upon by British and Egyptian anti-aircraft guns. The latter did, however, hit one SM.81 which had to come down in the sea, its crew being rescued by a CANT Z.506B floatplane which also took off from Italian occupied Rhodes. It was in the aftermath of this raid that Nos. 2 and 5 Squadrons REAF were placed under the command of the RAF's 252nd Fighter Wing. At that time No. 2 Squadron's headquarters appears to have been at Hilwan, probably under *Qa'id Asrab* Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Rabia. Meanwhile No. 5 Squadron was based at Dakhailah under *Qa'id Sirb* Hassan Mahmud. Work on upgrading Suez Aerodrome seems not to have been completed, so flights by No. 5 Gladiators between Almaza and Suez around this time may have been for training purposes rather than the movement of the squadron to a new home.

July saw further Italian air raids. On 4 July an attack on Alexandria was attempted in daylight, with nine SM.79s of the *34th Gruppo BT* again taking off from Gadurra in Rhodes. This time the RAF's No. 80 Squadron Gladiator managed to intercept the raiders, damaging two which nevertheless got back to base. There were no more Italian daytime air raids for a year though night bombing raids continued, despite intense and occasionally successful anti-aircraft defences. No details are currently available concerning sorties flown by the Gladiators of the REAF's No. 2 Squadron defending Cairo. All that seems to be published is an article by Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi who recalled that the happiest of his flying experiences was when, as a Gladiator pilot, he was 'flying alone in the middle of the clouds looking at distant horizons.'

Meanwhile Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid's logbook shows that for No. 5 Squadron, July 1940 was a busy period. He made dawn or dusk patrols from Suez on 2 July (at 0510 in Gladiator N5755), 4 July (at 0620 in Gladiator L9041), 13 July (at 0602 in Gladiator L9031 and again at 1805 in Gladiator LN5762), 14 July (at 0645 in Gladiator L9041), 15 July (at 0715 in Gladiator N5762), 16 July (at 0820 in Gladiator L9041, at 1800 in Gladiator L9030 and at 1845 in Gladiator L9030, making three sorties altogether). In the latter, Abu Zaid's Gladiator was 'Acting as target for No. 1 Squadron Cooperation' which shows that part of No. 1 Squadron was now back at Suez. He was in the air again on 20 July (at 0735 in Gladiator L90310 and at 1800 in Gladiator L9041), 22 July (at 0645 in Gladiator N5762), 23 July (at 1835 in Gladiator N5755), 25 July (at 1200 in Gladiator N5755), 29 July (at 0825 in Gladiator L9031) and 30 July (at 0930 in Gladiator L9031). Unfortunately, no further details are given.

At some time in August, probably early in the month, the Lysanders of No. 208 Squadron RAF replaced the REAF patrols between Marsa Matruh and Siwa when the Flight of Lysanders from No. 1 Squadron REAF was withdrawn. However, part of No. 1 Squadron – presumably a single Flight – was at Suez by 16 July. Yet there appears to be no mention of anti-submarine patrols over the Red Sea by Lysanders during July, so it is possible that these restarted in August, following a period of maintenance for the Flight of No. 1 Squadron machines which had been withdrawn from the Libyan frontier. A British Advisory Mission report in December 1940 stated that, since June that year, No. 1 Squadron only had 15 Lysanders. Furthermore, the squadron was facing increasing difficulties with maintenance and spare parts, despite receiving help from the civilian airline Misr Airlines during the complete overhaul of these aeroplanes. Meanwhile, in August and September 1940, all Egyptian Army units in the Western Desert were integrated into the defence plan for the Western Desert.

British prestige had suffered a serious blow when Italian forces in East Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea) invaded and rapidly overran British Somaliland between 3 and 19 August 1940. This made the Gulf of Aden as well as the Red Sea even more dangerous for British and Allied shipping, as well as for neutral vessels heading to and from the Suez Canal.

After a period of silence, information concerning No. 2 Squadron reappears in August 1940. Early in that month, or perhaps in late July, the squadron began affiliation exercises with the Hurricanes of the RAF's No. 80 Squadron at al-Amiriyah, south of Alexandria. According to Faisal Abd al-Mun'im, via Hassan Izzat, this became possible when a new Egyptian government came into office following the dismissal of Prime Minister Ali Mahir. Unfortunately, some of the REAF officers involved in these exercises came away even more anti-British than they had been beforehand, because of what they saw as the patronising, unhelpful and dismissive attitude of the RAF personnel with whom they worked. This also seems to have been when Italian bomber crews coincidentally – or perhaps knowingly – only targeted the RAF side of al-Amiriyah Aerodrome. According to Ali Muhammad Labib:

> A strange and funny episode the Egyptian pilots talk about often was when their base was located close to the British base near the coast [al-Amiriyah which they shared with No. 80 Squadron RAF]. Italian bombers of Savoia-Marchetti type with three engines would pay us a visit each night and would unload their bombs and return to where they came from, and what was so strange that not one single bomb hit our base. The Marchetti engines also emitted a unique and strange noise which triggered the [local] donkey to begin to bray long before they [the aeroplanes] reached the coast from the direction of the sea, which gave us advance warning [of the air raid].

The RAF's reaction to these phenomena – both the Italians' lopsided targeting and the donkey's air raid warning – is unrecorded. The Gladiators of No. 5 Squadron REAF were also involved in affiliation exercises with No. 80 Squadron RAF's Hurricanes at al-Amiriyah. Evidence, including that from Abu Zaid's logbook, suggests that the Egyptian fighter squadrons probably sent one Flight at a time to al-Amiriyah from their main bases at Almaza, Hilwan or Suez. The lack of flights in Abu Zaid's logbook during the first week of August might similarly suggest that he was attending lectures as part of the affiliation process. In addition to 'W/C. Coote', who was directly attached to No. 5 Squadron REAF, a 'W/O Smith' is also mentioned once, but whether he was also attached to No. 5 Squadron or featured in Abu Zaid's logbook as part of the affiliation process is unknown. Might this have been the same Flight Sergeant Smith who had been attached to the Royal Iraqi Air Force until 11 July 1940, now promoted to Warrant Officer? It is also worth noting a further reference to 'Egyptian' Audax K403, which was almost certainly the No. 5 Squadron hack.

By 15 August 1940, Abu Zaid was back at Almaza, along with the rest of No. 5 Squadron, as his logbook records a formation flight from Almaza to Dahshur in Gladiator L9030 that morning. The desert west of Dahshur town was already used as one of the REAF's main firing and perhaps bombing ranges; its airstrip later being used as a dispersal field by the EAF in the 1950s when it became known as al-Fayyum Road. Mid- to late August was a period of intense training for the Gladiator pilots of No. 5 Squadron. On the same day that Abu Zaid and his colleagues flew in formation to Dahshur, Abu Zaid himself took off again at 0855 for 'air to air firing', the first time this was mentioned in his logbook. It was repeated at 1120, being followed by 'Formation back to Almaza' at 1200 hours – all in the same Gladiator number L9030.

Two days later, Abu Zaid was again in the air, taking off at 1605 in Gladiator N5755 for 'Patrol order, 1 hr. 10 min.', followed at 1805 by 'Dogfighting' (air combat training) in an Avro 626 (number J323) with Wing Commander Coote. The next day he was again in the air with Warrant Officer Smith for 'Dogfighting' in Avro 626 (J330). This was followed by a further formation flight back to Dahshur on 20 August, an 'air to air firing' sortie over the firing range, and then a return flight to Almaza, all in Gladiator L9030. Exactly the same pattern would be seen after five days' rest, this time in Gladiator L9033. On no occasion did the pilots or their aeroplanes spend a night at Dahshur airstrip which was probably little more than a cleared stretch of desert at the time.

It may have been around August 1940 that *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Hassan Tawfiq of the REAF Headquarters was sent for staff training, thereafter specialising in communications and radar for most of the rest of the war. During September the British at last got their wish and Egyptian units in this area were integrated into the Western Desert Army (later better known as the 8th Army), and it was also around now, or a little earlier, that REAF Gladiators, Lysanders and some, though clearly not all, Ansons were given British RAF identification codes. Thus, the Lysanders of No. 1 Squadron had GF and then an individual letter painted on their fuselages (Lysander Mk. I, serial Y511 getting the code GF-U). This was, however, only a temporary measure as the letters GF were later used by No. 56 OTU RAF from 1943 to 1945. Similarly the Gladiators of No. 2 Squadron were given the code letters PY (Gladiator Mk. I, serial L8028 getting the code PY-C). Once again the letters PY were subsequently used by the RAF's 1527 Radio Aids Training Flight in 1944–45. It seems that a comparable code was not given to the Gladiators of No. 5 Squadron REAF. However, three Ansons of No. 3 Squadron were given the code NV, these identification letters later being used by No. 79 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) from 1943 to 1945. Such evidence strongly suggests that RAF unit code letters ceased to be used in 1942, probably as a result of the REAF being grounded.

On 12 September 1940, the British Ambassador in Cairo, Sir Miles Lampson, reported that a British suggestion that the RAF buy much or most of the REAF's equipment was not well received. Even this notoriously undiplomatic diplomat recognised that such an idea was not sensible and would be deeply resented by the REAF. The following day Italian forces crossed the frontier and invaded Egypt, accompanied by air raids. They rapidly occupied the area around Sidi Barani while the ongoing reorganisation of the air defence of Lower Egypt by the RAF and the REAF was hurriedly completed.

This left the protection of Alexandria, the Nile Delta and Canal Zone to No. 255 Fighter Wing based at al-Miaks with Sector headquarters at al-Amiriyah and Hilwan. No. 255 Wing largely consisted of RAF and Commonwealth units but also included the two now fully operational REAF Gladiator squadrons, Nos. 2 and 5, which had been undertaking affiliation exercises at al-Amiriyah. On completing its affiliation (before mid-September), No. 2 Squadron was given responsibility for the defence of Cairo by day, while No. 5 had the same responsibility for Suez and the southern part of the Suez Canal. Meanwhile the main enemy threat came from Italian SM.81 bombers which, first by day and later by night, focussed their attacks upon British military installations in and around Alexandria.

One Flight of six No. 1 Squadron Lysanders (from a total of 16 operational machines at this time) continued to support the Egyptian Mobile Brigade which had been sent to its pre-prepared positions in the Western Desert. This well-balanced force now consisted of a light car regiment (unarmoured), a squadron of light tanks, a light artillery battery, an anti-tank battery, a machine gun company, a field section of engineers, some detachments of ordnance maintenance, and six motor transport companies of the Egyptian Army Service Corps.

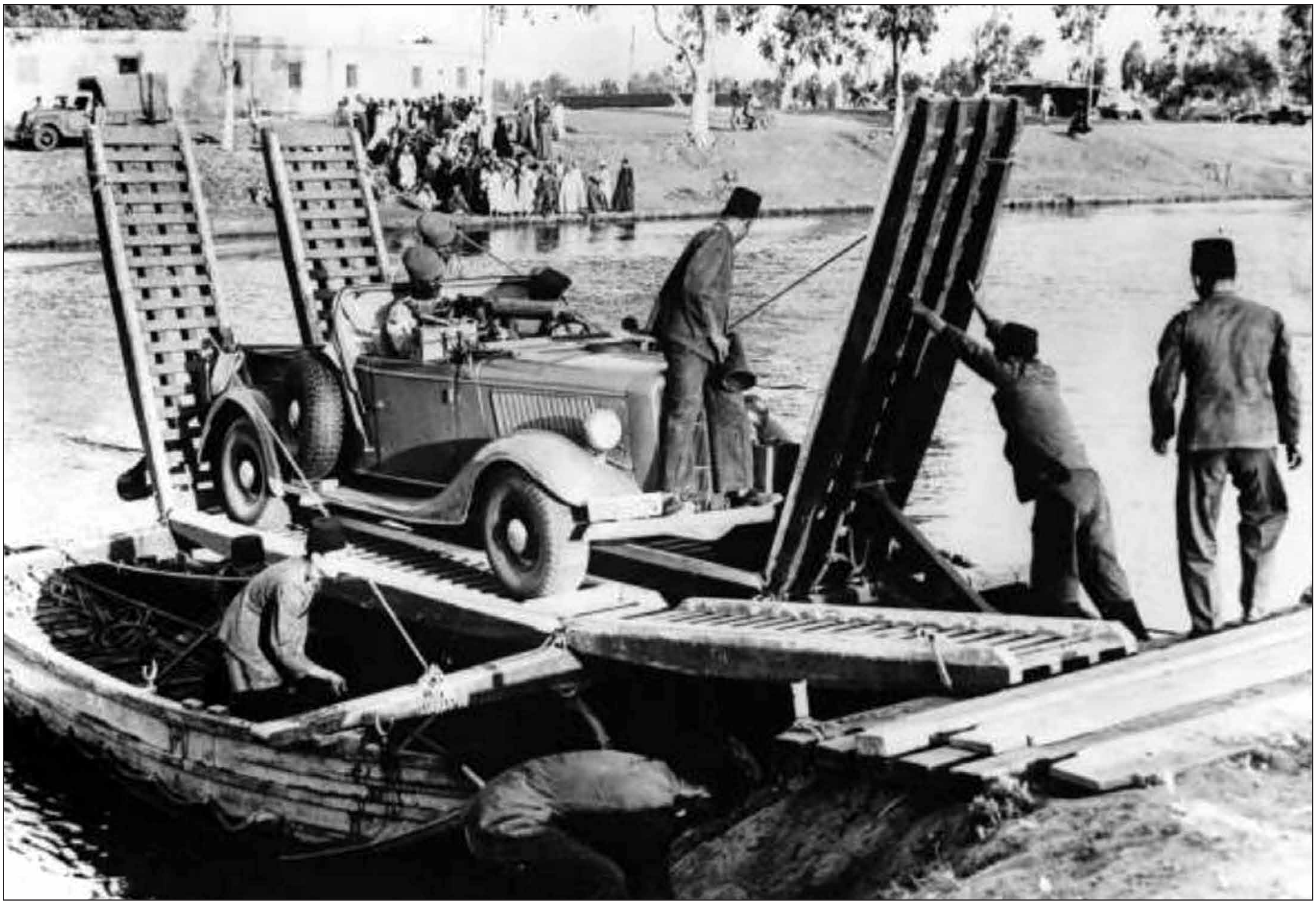
For the British, Allied and Egyptian fighter squadrons defending Egyptian skies, the forward air observation line remained vital, even though the Italian invasion forced it back in several places. The areas under threat were vast, and the enemy's potential targets widely scattered – though some, like the Alexandria harbour facilities, were obvious. The very few radar sets currently available were similarly scattered, though some were also mobile. However, their performance was extremely limited. Even when information from air observers and radars was put together, No. 252 Fighter Wing at al-Miaks could only provide the defending squadrons with a general idea about approaching attacks. Interceptions by the RAF were therefore few and generally unsuccessful.

Meanwhile Egyptian Gladiators could only operate in daylight, thus serving as little more than a deterrence against daylight raids, which was increasingly frustrating for Nos. 2 and 5 Squadrons. The nature of many Italian air raids also made life difficult for the defenders, including the REAF at Suez, with the greatest threat coming from low-level torpedo, bombing and mining attacks which roared in over the sea and rarely gave the defenders more than a few minutes' warning of their approach.

On 11 September 1940, now led by No. 2 Squadron *Qa'id Asrab* (Squadron Leader) Salah Farid, again swapped places with No. 5, taking over the daylight air defence of Cairo at Almaza, while the latter moved from Almaza to Suez. This was probably because No. 2 was considered more experienced and perhaps better trained. Nevertheless, they would change places again, seemingly several times. Even the normally unsympathetic British ambassador, Miles Lampson, reported on 12 September that No. 2 Squadron was well trained and well equipped – despite its increasingly obsolescent Gloster Gladiator fighters.

Once again Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid's logbook sheds an almost unique light on the activities of one of these squadrons. In the early part of September, No. 5 was still at Almaza, with trips to Dahshur for live-firing training. Abu Zaid usually flew either Gladiator L9033 or L9031. On two occasions his logbook specified that a flight involved a formation of nine aeroplanes – in other words the entire squadron – which had not been mentioned earlier and was presumably a new skill for the pilots of No. 5 Squadron. On 11 September Abu Zaid took part in a formation flight (the numbers not specified this time) from Almaza to Suez, where the unit seems to have remained until the end of the month or early October. Miles Lampson stated on 12 September that No. 5 was 'incomplete' at Suez, that overall 18 Gladiators and 16 Lysanders from the REAF were currently available to support the British, but that the most likely location of air combat was Alexandria.

Abu Zaid did not fly on the day that the Italians crossed the Libyan frontier, but on the following day, 14 September 1940, he took off in Gladiator L9033 to patrol over the Suez oil refinery at 4,600 metres. The following day he took to the air twice for air combat (dogfighting) training in two different Gladiators. After a day's rest, Abu Zaid again flew on patrol over a location identified as C12; almost certainly referring to Sheet C.12 of the British War Office 1:100,000 map of the Canal. Four days later he went up for 'Fighter attack practice', followed by the same on the next day. No



A military motor car mounted with a Vickers machine gun being ferried across one of the main irrigation canals in Egypt during the Second World War. Though the vehicle is said to be British, the crew in the car look local or Sudanese while the ferry operators are clearly Egyptian Army. (Albert Grandolini collection)

further details were given concerning Abu Zaid's final two flights of the month, on 24 and 28 September.

In the autumn or early winter of 1940, Fred Weston of the British Advisory Mission recalled that, in the aftermath of the fall of France and with the Battle of Britain raging, the majority of REAF officers – like most people across the world – expected Nazi Germany to defeat the United Kingdom as it had already defeated France. Meanwhile, the departure of Group Captain Tait had left the REAF with a serious problem, lacking sufficiently senior officers, or indeed men with staff experience, to run its headquarters efficiently. Ali Muhammad Labib, who served in the REAF at this time and later rose to high rank in what became the UARAF, fully recognised this situation in his history of the Egyptian Air Force, writing, 'Internal weakness stemmed from a lack of funds, and inexperienced administrators who lacked a [necessary] technical background and were also influenced by politics.'

Following the Italian invasion, in October the Egyptian government ordered the garrison in Siwa to fight if attacked. This exposed outpost was still supported – if distantly – by No. 1 (Army Coop.) Squadron which had Squadron Leader V.A. Pope as its resident instructor. The air defence responsibilities of No. 252 (Fighter) Wing at al-Miaks now covered Upper Egypt and even the Sudan, though this may actually have been the case for some time. Italian air raids were now so frequent, two or three times a day and every night for months, that RAF pilots starting to refer to the incoming bombers as 'Balbo's Circus' – named after *Maresciallo dell'Aria* Italo Balbo, the famous pre-war Italian pilot and governor of Libya until he was shot down by friendly fire on 28 June 1940.

Wing Commander P.B. Coote of the British Advisory Mission was now resident instructor and advisor to both of the REAF's Gladiator fighter squadrons, Nos. 2 and 5. These were still regularly swapping places between Almaza to defend Cairo, and Suez to defend the oil refinery, harbour and southern part of the Suez Canal. For example, early October saw No. 2 at Suez, and No. 5 at Almaza. Whichever was at Suez also seems to have carried out meteorological flights and patrols over the uppermost part of the Gulf of Suez where ships congregated before entering the Canal itself, presenting the enemy with a tempting target.

Italian raids on the Suez Canal were now growing intense and posed a real danger to American ships which had once more been authorised by the US government to enter the war zone. Several British and Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries moved to Suez while defended anchorages were established at Abu Zanima on the Sinai coast halfway down the Gulf of Suez, and at Ras Ghimsa (Gimsa) on the African coast at the southern entrance to the Gulf. Ships could pull back to these if Suez (the site of the old town) and Port Tawfiq (the harbour area at the southern end of the Canal itself) got too dangerous.

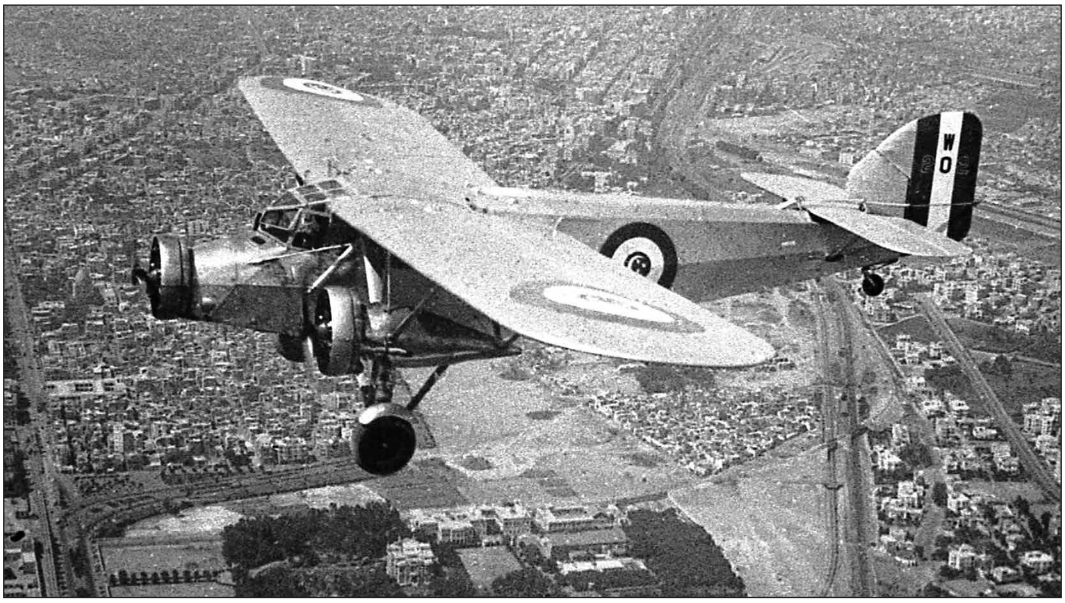
Although the REAF's Gladiators could do little against the SM.82s of the *41st Gruppo* operating from Libya and the CANT 1007bis of the 172nd Squadriglia based in the Aegean, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid was amongst those Egyptian pilots subsequently proposed for decorations to reward their efforts, though he himself claimed no air combat success. His logbook nevertheless recorded two 'patrol and interception' sorties as distinct from mere 'patrol' missions. These were on 27 October and 4 December 1940. Otherwise, his flights averaged from seven to 16 per month, though they tended to be grouped into busy times with up to three sorties a day or one daily flight across several days followed by several days without leaving the ground. In October Abu Zaid's flying duties ranged from 'Dogfighting' training, 'Formation fighter attack' (quite frequently), to simple patrols and 'Acting as enemy' (twice), plus the potentially more active 'Formation patrol and interception'.

Nos. 3 and 4 Squadrons seem to have had a quiet time in October 1940, but an appendix to the Advisory Mission's Half Yearly Report, dated 31 October, noted that the Chief Flying Instructor at the REAF's Flying Training School was still Wing Commander E.A.C. Britton, supported by Flying Officer L.F. Humphrey as another instructor. Might the latter have been the Warrant Officer Humphrey mentioned in Muhammad Abu Zaid's logbook, now promoted to a commissioned rank?

By November 1940 it is clear that the Flight of No. 1 Squadron Lysanders supporting the Egyptian Army in the Western Desert, including Prince Isma'il Da'ud's Mobile Force, were divided between Daba'a and Bahariya Oasis. Normally there appear to have been two of these aeroplanes at Daba'a, a village just west of al-Alamain, from where they also cooperated with British forces facing the Italians. Another distinctive feature of all No. 1 Squadron's Lysanders was they wore an unusual variation of the REAF roundel, which lacked the central green disc. Instead, the normally white crescent and three stars were painted green on an enlarged central white disc.

The aircraft at Daba'a also seem to have been under the personal leadership of No. 1 Squadron's CO, *Qa'id Sirb* Salih Mahmud Salih, while the squadron's British advisor, Squadron Leader V.A. Pope moved from place to place, helping wherever he was most needed. Among other tasks, these Lysanders are said to have located aircraft which had force-landed in the deep desert, reportedly including an Italian Savoia-Marchetti bomber which came down virtually intact. Those based at Bahariya were operating in an isolated part of the Sahara Desert, south of the Great Qattara Depression, flying between the oases of Bahariya and Siwa, enabling the lonely Egyptian garrison in Siwa to maintain contact with Prince Isma'il Da'ud's Mobile Brigade.

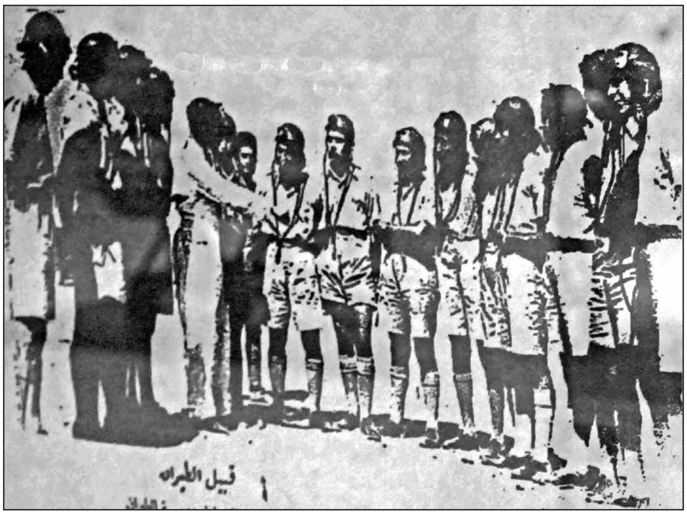
During this period, the Egyptians in Siwa had several skirmishes with Italian troops, capturing some. The Siwa garrison was also kept in touch with British troops further north by a handful of British Lysanders from No. 208 Squadron RAF. On 7 November, 18 Fiat CR.32s and six Breda Ba.65s of the Italian Air Force's *50th Stormo* strafed the airstrip some kilometres from Siwa Oasis, claiming two Lysanders destroyed on the ground. In fact, only one was damaged (serial number L4721) which was a British rather than an Egyptian aeroplane.



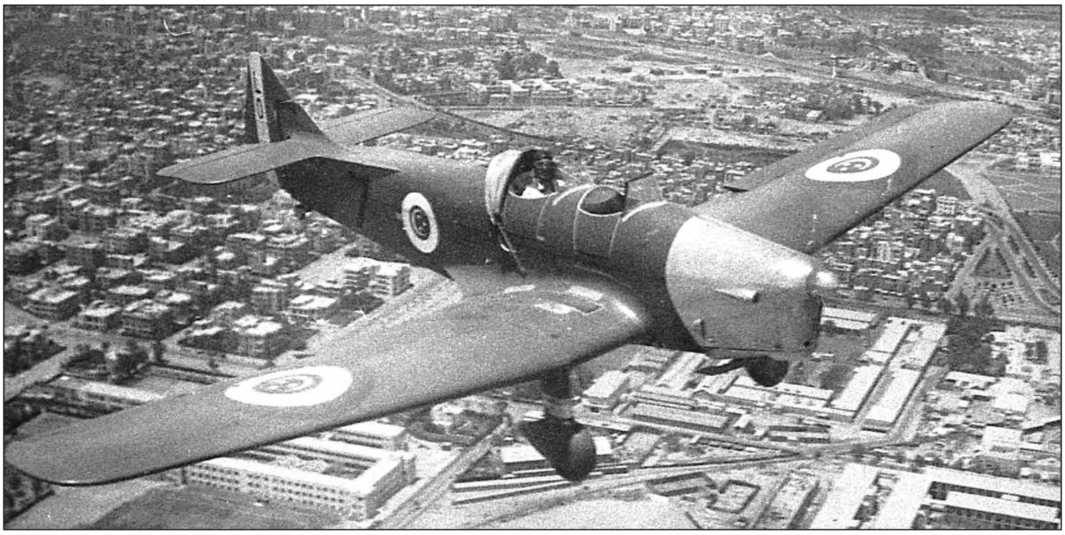
Another air-to-air study shows the REAF's Westland Wessex (W202) in flight over the north-eastern quarters of the expanding city of Cairo. (V.H. Tait archive)

Away to the east, a second Flight of No. 1 Squadron Lysanders carried on with dawn and dusk shipping protection patrols over the Gulf of Suez while longer range patrols were flown by Avro Ansons from No. 3 Squadron REAF. The latter operated from Suez and from Almaza outside Cairo, patrolling as far as Hurghadah on the African coast, just beyond the southern entrance to the Gulf of Suez. From here they would escort convoys on the final stage of their long journey around Africa. The main concern of all these aircraft were the Italian submarines still based in Eritrea. The Egyptians' task was nevertheless made easier by the fact that the British had no submarines in this area, so any sighting of submerged submarines were immediately identified as hostile and were therefore attacked. Whether any such targets were in reality Italian submarines, rather than Bryde's whales (normally up to 15 metres long) or the rarer Humpback and Minke, all of which are found in the Red Sea, remains unknown, but several attacks were nevertheless made.

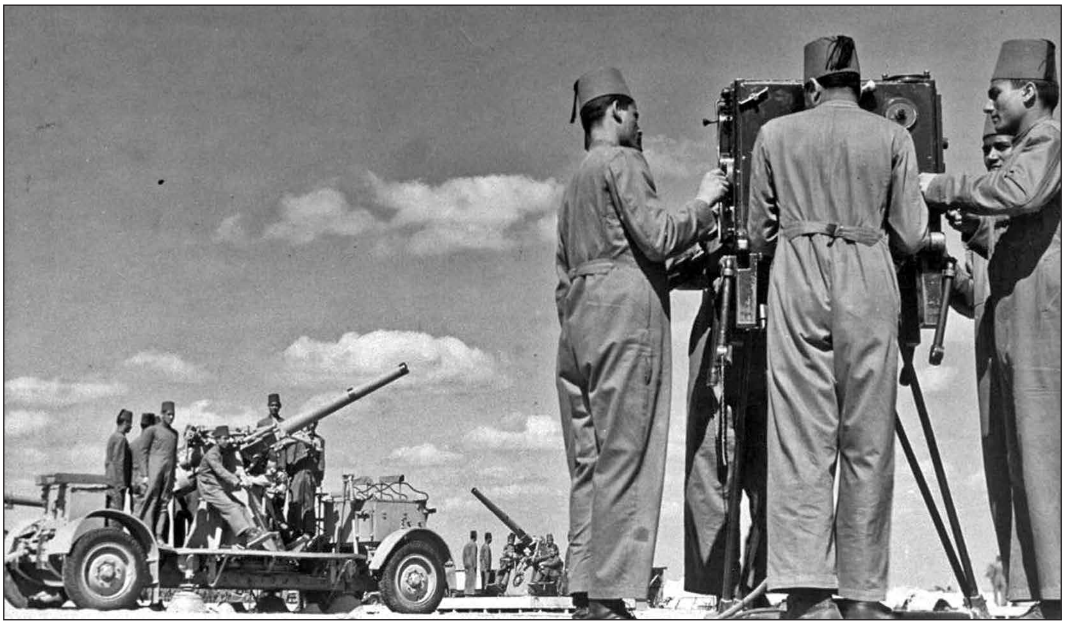
Despite their enthusiasm, by November 1940 the fighter pilots of Nos. 2 and 5 Squadrons recognised that their Gladiators had virtually no hope of intercepting the high-speed SM.79 bombers that the *Regia Aeronautica* was now using. In fact, recollections of their periods at Suez by members of No. 2 Squadron tended to focus upon aspects of their social life, such as the marriage of their colleague, the 21 year old Adli al-Shafa'i, and of his apparently greater interest in tennis than in his REAF career. Adli al-Shafa'i would subsequently represent his country in 32 matches in the Davis Cup Competition from 1946 to 1955. His first child, a daughter, was born in 1942



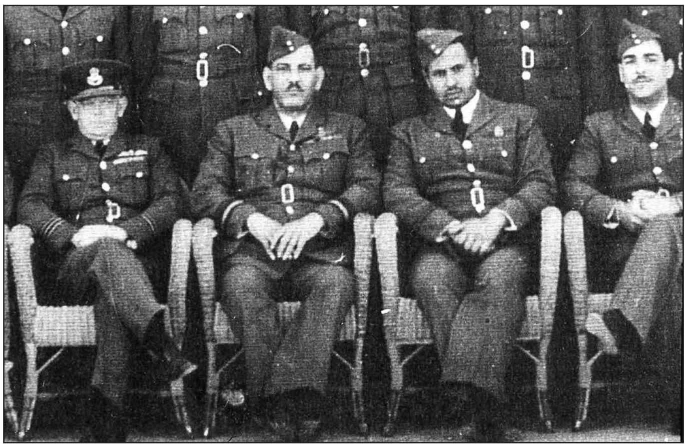
A pre-flight briefing, reportedly during a REAF training exercise before the Second World War. (EAF Museum)



A Miles Magister of the REAF's FTS based at Almaza in flight over Cairo. During the war years the FTS's Magisters, and some other training machines, had the final numerals of their serial number repeated large on the rear fuselage. (Tait collection)



Egyptian Army anti-aircraft crew training with a listening device during 1940. (Albert Grandolini collection)



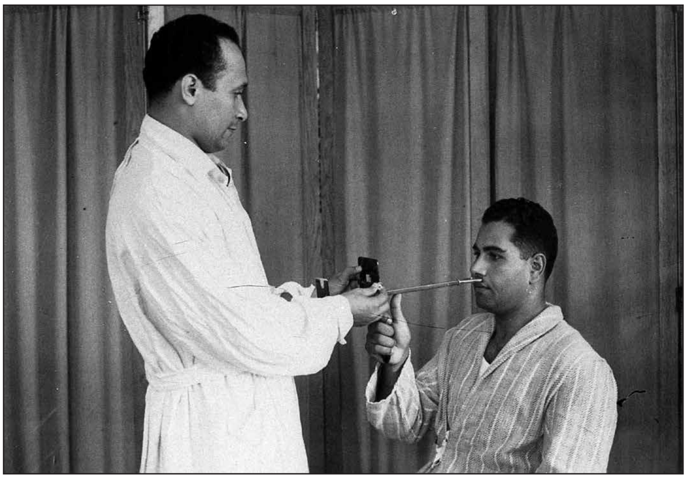
Senior men at the REAF's Flying Training School at Almaza, photographed in 1940. From the left they are Wing Commander A.E.C. Britton of the British Advisory Mission, Hassan Abd al-Wahab Pasha the Director of the REAF, Flight Lieutenant Nu'man Nada of the REAF and another unnamed REAF officer. (Fred Weston archive)

followed by a son, Isma'il al-Shafa'i, in 1947 – the latter continuing the tennis rather than flying tradition by becoming the only Egyptian player to make the Top 40 in international tennis rankings.

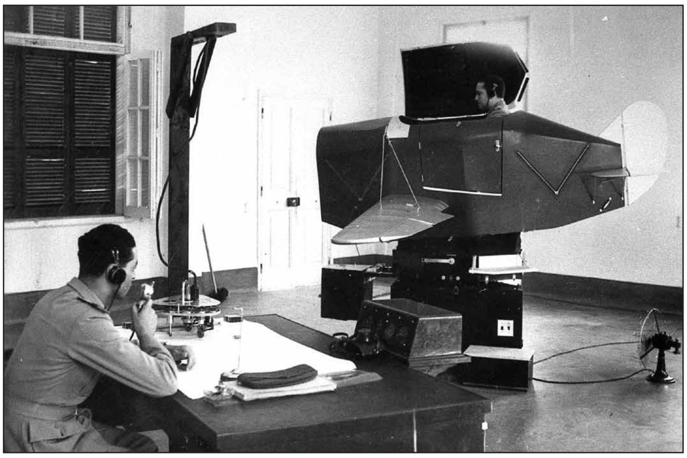
In contrast, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid remained utterly committed to the Egyptian Air force and to No. 2 Squadron which was still commanded by *Qa'id Sirb* Hassan Mahmud. During November 1940 most of his 15 sorties were for training, either 'Dogfighting' or 'Air to air firing', with one 'Formation fighter attack'. There were also two 'Patrol orders' and four unspecified flights. Abu Zaid's last take-off in November was at 0935 on the 27th in Gladiator L9033, the duty being unspecified. He must surely have been disappointed not to fly the following day, Thursday 28 November 1940, which British records list as the first combat mission by REAF fighters. Some of No. 5 Squadron's Gladiators were sent to intercept Italian bombers which were attacking the Suez Canal, but were unable to make contact. This seems to have been the first Italian air raid against the Canal itself, rather than the facilities around Suez and its harbour.

According to British sources, the pilots of No. 5 Squadron averaged only around 150 flying hours on all types; still fewer on Gladiators. Their frustration was becoming obvious to both the Egyptian and British military authorities, especially when enemy aeroplanes started dropping parachute mines into the Canal, forcing Allied shipping to unload at Suez and thus causing even greater congestion. Two days later Abu Zaid was again in the air in Gladiator L9039, but without reported results.

No. 3 Squadron suffered more serious losses during its patrols over the Gulf of Suez than either of the REAF's fighter squadrons during their fruitless attempts to intercept Italian bombers. Two Ansons were lost during these missions, the crew of one being killed while attempting an emergency landing in thick fog at Almaza having returned from Hurghadah. The second incident fortunately resulted in no casualties, other than the aircraft. Both Ansons were later replaced by ex-RAF machines but in the meantime long-range patrols by Egyptian Ansons over the Gulf of Suez had to be curtailed. The REAF's Ansons and its Avro 652 Anson prototype were also in demand by No. 4 (Bomber) Squadron whose hopes of receiving Bristol Blenheims had finally been dashed. Nevertheless, No. 4's aircrews still needed to be trained on twin-engine aeroplanes, ready for the day when their archaic 'Egyptian' Audaxes would at last be replaced. Meanwhile there are unconfirmed suggestions that some



A student pilot at the REAF's Flying Training School undergoing medical tests around 1940. Because the great majority of Egyptian military cadets volunteered to join the Air Force, the medical standards of those selected were notably high. (EAF Museum collection)



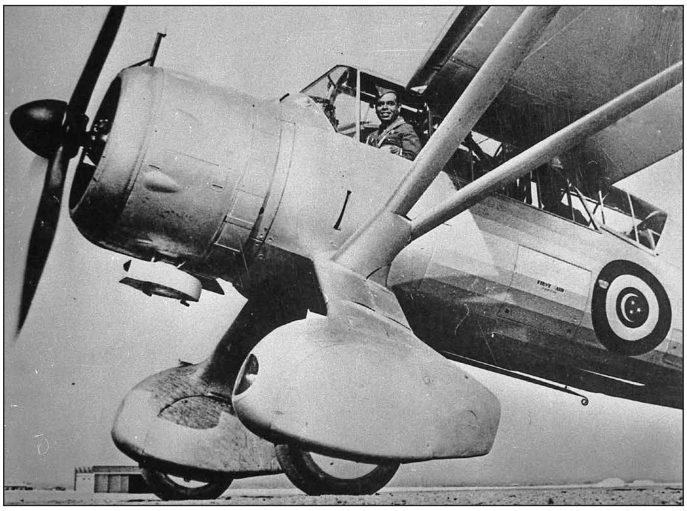
Some facilities at the REAF's FTS at Almaza were primitive, outdated and increasingly overcrowded. By 1940 Almaza did, however, have at least one Link Trainer, an early form of flight simulator. (EAF Museum collection)

of these crews took part in the long-distance Red Sea patrols, or were being readied to do so.

In late 1940, *Liwa* Abd al-Wahab suddenly resigned as Director of the REAF, not for political reasons but because he could not get on with the new Army Chief of Staff. The British made clear that they were sorry to see him go, but his successor *Liwa* (Brigadier) Ali Muwafi, who was another experienced Egyptian Army rather than REAF officer, soon made a good impression. The REAF's FTS continued training aircrew and technical officers as fast as it could, with another large group of cadets passing out in November 1940, while their place was taken by a new intake which would be the last to graduate before the crisis of 1942 and resulting grounding of the REAF.

The new intake was unusual in including six young police officers who had decided to transfer to the REAF. They were Muhammad Wali Alim, Abu Bakr Musa, Abbas al-Masri, Muhammad al-Arabi, Jamal Khurshid Bakir and Shukri Hashad. The latter was the brother of a pilot already serving in the Air Force, Muhammed Nabih Hashad, who was reportedly unaware that Shukri had followed him into the REAF. Amongst the graduates from the FTS in November 1940 were a number of significant individuals, including Muhammad Adli Kafafi who now received his wings as a *Tayyar Thani* or Second Pilot (Pilot Officer). Husayn Zulfiqar Sabri was probably another from this cohort, along with Mahmud Barakat, the son of the Chief of the Cairo Mounted Police, and Midhat Muhammad Kasdi.

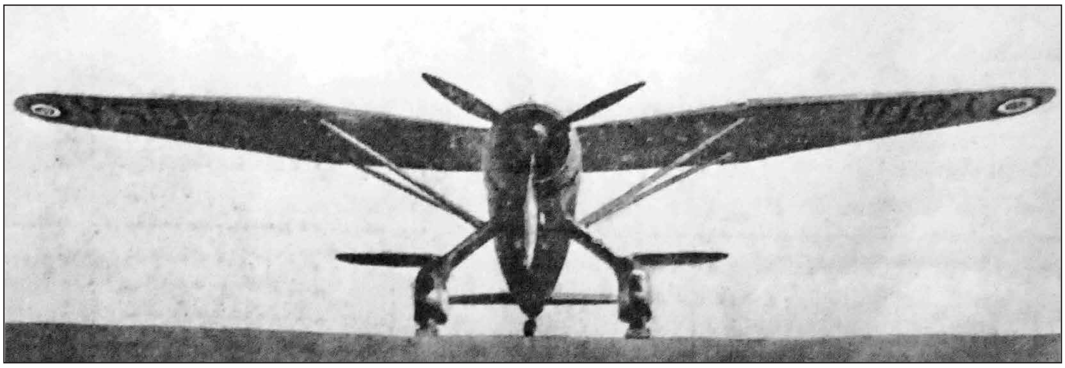
Egyptian aircrew studying a map in front of an unidentified aircraft, as published in the newspaper *Al-Ahram* on 6 December 1939. The man on the right may be one of the squadron's British advisors. (EAF Museum collection)



A Westland Lysander of No. 1 Squadron, REAF, with the unit's CO *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Salih Muhammad Salih in the cockpit. This photograph may have been taken in January as No. 1 Squadron was preparing for a highly ambitious flight to Khartoum in the Sudan, in company with two Ansons from No. 3 Squadron (EAF Museum)

The final month of 1940 saw the British launch a devastatingly successful counter-offensive again the Italian Army entrenched around Sidi Barani. Named Operation Compass, this began on 9 December and ending on 9 February 1941, resulting in the Italians being driven back deep inside their colony of Libya, and with the eastern province of Cyrenaica falling to British, Imperial and Allied forces. As part of the preparations for Operation Compass, the major aerodromes of Alexandria and Dakhailah had been handed over entirely to the RAF, with REAF personnel being withdrawn, mostly to Almaza.

A week or so before Operation Compass was launched, the new head of the British Advisory Mission, General Robert Graham William Hawkins Stone, sent a secret letter to the Under-Secretary of the Egyptian Air Ministry in which he stated that the REAF's



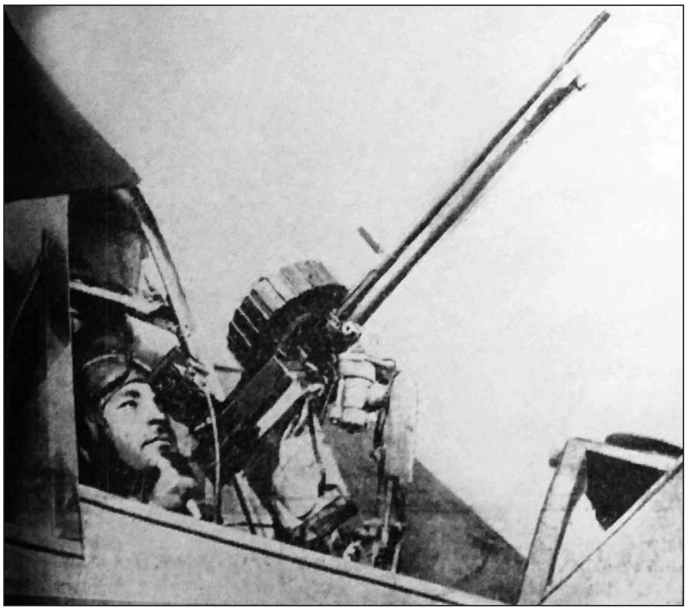
Also featuring on the front page of *Al-Ahram* on 6 December 1939 was this dramatic view of one of the REAF's Westland Lysanders, with its serial number (Y501, the first to be delivered to Egypt) visible beneath both wings in inter-war RAF style. (EAF Museum collection)

strength was 140 aeroplanes, but that only 66 of these were currently operational. Other sources indicate that Nos. 2 and 5 (Fighter) Squadrons REAF each had eight operational Gladiators but that, at one point, No. 252 (Fighter) Wing could only draw upon these REAF units, plus two Gladiators of the Fleet Air Arm, for the air defence of the entire Alexandria naval base, Nile Delta and Suez Canal – a total of 18 old-fashioned biplane fighters; all other aeroplanes having been committed to the forthcoming offensive.

The *Regia Aeronautica's* SM.81s, currently the backbone of the Italian bomber squadrons, were soon only used at night against British naval bases in Egypt, along with other types. Alexandria harbour remained the Italians' primary target, and civilian casualties mounted in the surrounding streets. Meanwhile in the exposed oasis of Siwa the population of the main town (also called Siwa) had to abandon the traditional mud-brick tower houses with their five or six stories. This was a style of building which went back to the early medieval period and recalled the more famous 'tower houses' of Yemen. Italian bombing had, in fact, obliged them to live in even more ancient rock-cut tombs.

The British Advisory Mission's report on the REAF in December 1940 was more positive than General Stone's confidential letter to the Egyptian Under-Secretary. It stated that the standard of training on the REAF was notably better than it had been at the start of the Second World War. Furthermore, it listed the REAF's strength as: 16 x Avro 626, 4 x Fairey Gordon, 1 x DH Moth, 21 x 'Egyptian' Audax (both Marks), 37 x Miles Magister, 1 x Avro 652, 1 x Westland Wessex, 1 x Avro 642, 15 x Westland Lysander, 35 x Gloster Gladiator, 1 x Avro Anson, and 12 x Hawker Hart. This made a total of 145 aircraft, but there was no indication of how many were operational. Perhaps the Advisory Mission felt it their duty to paint a rosy picture. On the other hand, the report did point to a serious shortage of spare parts, without which the REAF would be unable to maintain its currently relatively high standards. As for the REAF itself, its senior officers appear to have accepted that in present circumstances the British had to take priority where spares were concerned; the defeat and expulsion of the Italians coming before all else. Meanwhile, the Egyptian civilian airline Misr Airlines was still helping REAF and RAF squadrons with aircraft maintenance at Almaza.

General Stone's confidential letter to the Egyptian Air Ministry in December 1940 had put the strength of No. 1 Squadron at 17 Lysanders, of which only seven were operational. Another source put this figure as low as six, perhaps referring only to the six aeroplanes supporting *Liwa* Isma'il Da'ud Pasha's Mobile Brigade in the Western Desert. It was probably around this time that two ex-RAF Lysanders were transferred to the REAF, and by the end of the month No. 1 Squadron might again have had 15 serviceable machines. At the start of 1941, a handful of No. 1 Squadron's Lysanders under *Qa'id Sirb* Salih Mahmud Salih were again patrolling the Gulf of Suez as well as providing target-towing services for the British Royal Navy and Army in this area. Quite where the target-towing gear came from is unclear, though it might have been taken from the REAF's never entirely operational Fairey Gordons.



The observer-gunner of a REAF Westland Lysander. When this image was published in the Egyptian press in December 1939, there was considerable support for the Allied cause and some in the Egyptian military even hoped to go to war against Italy which had so brutally crushed resistance in neighbouring Libya. (EAF Museum collection)

The integration of the REAF's fighter squadrons with the RAF as part of No. 255 Fighter Wing, from whom they took operational orders, was proving highly successful. In contrast, despite the application of RAF unit codes to some of No.1 and No. 3 Squadrons' Lysanders and Ansons, these units remained under Egyptian control which the British regarded as a source of operational weakness. REAF aircraft were not normally permitted to use RAF airfields, with the possible exception of the fighters under specific conditions. For most of December, No. 2 Squadron was based at Suez and No. 5 at Almaza, though they continued changing places. Elements of whichever squadron was based at Almaza were always at readiness under No. 255 Fighter Wing's Sector HQ Hilwan, but there had yet to be air raids on Cairo, in contrast to the situation at Suez. According to the Advisory Mission, the personnel of both squadrons were ready to fight but lacked confidence in themselves and their aeroplanes, despite now having sole responsibility for the daytime defence of both Cairo and Suez.

The confidential note from General Stone to the Egyptian Air Ministry further stated that No. 2 Squadron (currently at Suez) had 16 Gladiators of which just eight were operational, while No. 5 (currently at Almaza) had 17 aeroplanes of which eight were operational. During December, No. 5 Squadron suffered one fatal crash, but this was not mentioned in Abu Zaid's logbook. December

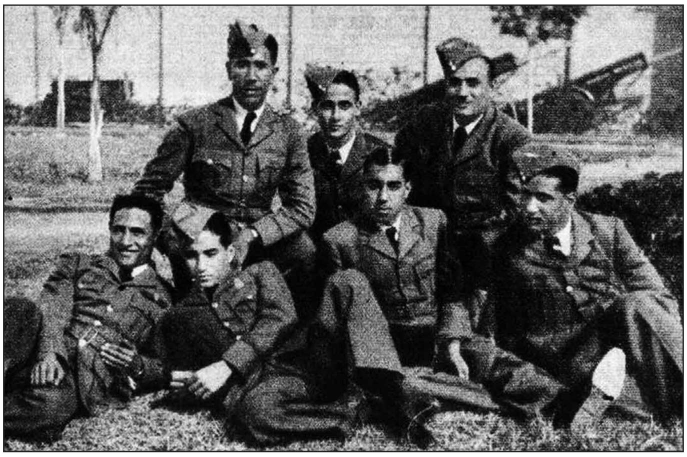
Pilot Officer Abd al-Latif Baghdadi in the cockpit of his Gladiator in December 1939, after being posted from No. 2 Squadron to No. 5 Squadron of the REAF. (Author's collection)

was a relatively quiet month for him, with only seven sorties being flown between the 4th and the 26th. These included 'Dogfighting', a 'Formation patrol and interception', 'Formation fighter attack' and a single example of 'Forced landings', perhaps as a further aspect of training.

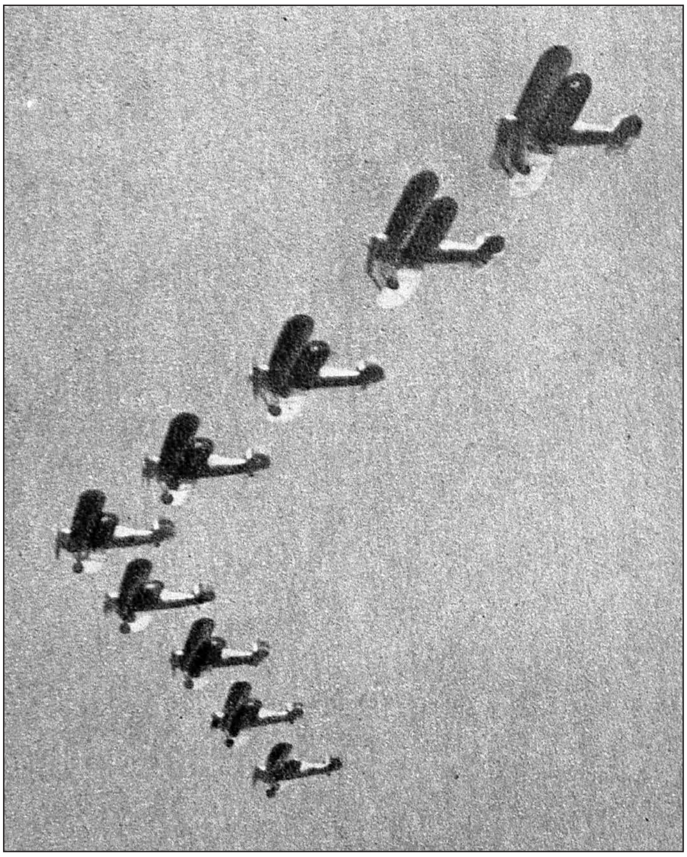
Some of No. 3 Squadron's remaining Ansons were still reportedly carrying out long distance patrols over the Gulf of Suez in December, while the rest of the unit now consisted of the Avro Commodore, a Moth, the Westland Wessex, and the Percival Q.6s, one of which was always reserved for King Faruq's use. General Stone's confidential note put No. 3 Squadron's Ansons and Wessex at seven aeroplanes, only two of which were operational, while seemingly regarding the other machines as separate, or perhaps as part of a nominal Royal Flight.

There was now deep political discontent in this unit, at least amongst some of its personnel, one of whom was the Anson pilot Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf. From 1940 onwards Abd al-Ra'uf was the most important member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the REAF, actively seeking recruits and support for the Brotherhood's aims. He achieved clear if limited successes. Unlike some of his colleagues in the REAF's officer corps, he was also vocally proud of what he considered his 'pure' Egyptian descent. In contrast, another pilot in No. 3 Squadron, *Tayyar Awal* (Flying Officer) Umar Bakir, remained focussed on his Air Force duties throughout his career. He subsequently flew in the REAF-operated RAF No. 1411 Meteorological Flight then volunteered to serve in the RAF's No. 216 Transport and Ferry Group, before flying fighters against the Israeli Air Force during the Palestine War. Subsequently Umar Bakir was placed in command of the REAF's first Gloster Meteor jet fighter squadron in the early 1950s.

While the British and their allies launched Operation Compass against Italian forces, the British Advisory Mission reported that the REAF's No. 4 Squadron was in particularly poor shape, lacking anything approaching modern bombers but nevertheless still being given much too much work for its existing 'Egyptian' Audaxes and Gordons. This included assisting instruction in air fighting and gunnery for other squadrons. For two months its apparently home-made target-towing gear had to be supplemented with gear loaned by the RAF. According to General Stone's confidential memo, No. 4 Squadron currently had 10 aeroplanes of which only four were operational. For its part the Egyptian government still hoped to purchase suitable bombers for No. 4 Squadron which had hangers and other equipment for such a force, but the British would still not supply the machines.



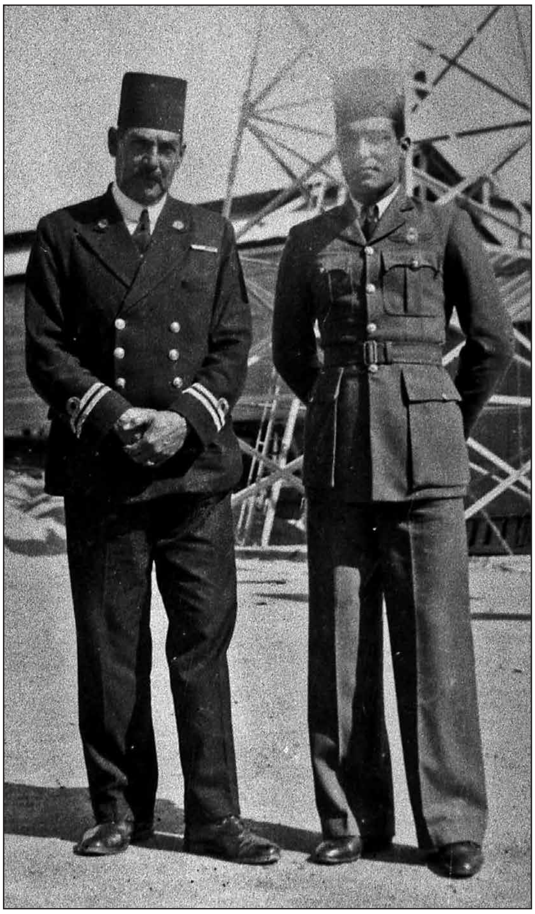
Newly qualified Pilot Officer Abd al-Latif Baghdadi (far left) of the REAF with several colleagues in front of the Officers' Mess at Almaza in 1939. (Author's collection)



No. 2 Squadron REAF's newly acquired Gloster Gladiators in formation in 1939 or 1940, clearly showing the distinctive half black undersides characteristic of both British and Egyptian fighters in a temperate European camouflage scheme during this period. (EAF Museum collection)

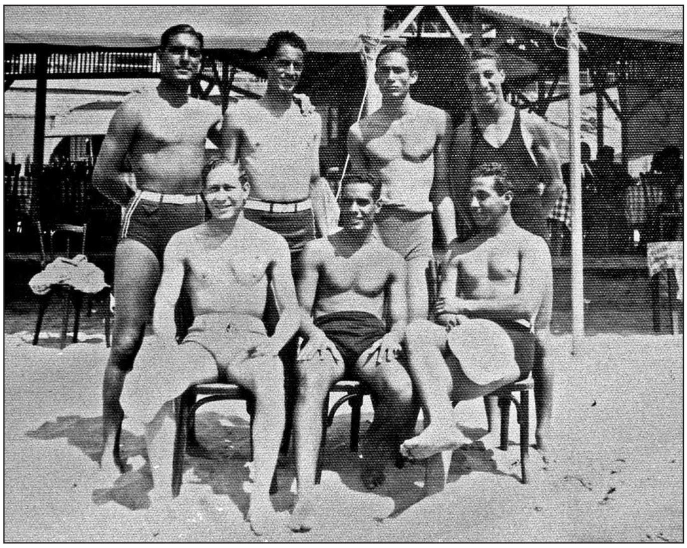
On the other hand, urgent but secret discussions between the Egyptian and British authorities continued concerning one or more replacement Lysanders for No. 1 Squadron and even for the supply of seven ex-RAF Hurricanes for a new REAF fighter squadron. Nevertheless, these would not replace the REAF's operational losses, and would also have left the force seriously short of spares.

One significant change was meanwhile obvious to everyone, and this was the transfer of the REAF's FTS from the dangerously overcrowded Almaza Aerodrome to Khanka, about 13 kilometres further north of its previous home. Until now this landing ground only had an aircraft repair depot, usually referred to as Jabal Asfar. Again according to General Stone, the FTS currently had 74 aeroplanes, a mixture of Miles Magisters, Avro 626s, Avro-built Hawker 'Egyptian' Audaxes and Hawker Hart Trainers, 37 of which



Muhammad Abu Zaid as a newly commissioned REAF officer seen with his father Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid who was a lieutenant in the Egyptian Coastguard Service. (Abu Zaid family archive)

Tayyar Thani (Pilot Officer) Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Ra'uf early in his REAF career. From 1940 onwards Abd al-Ra'uf was the most important member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the REAF, actively seeking recruits and support for the Brotherhood's aims. (via Nour Bardai)



As a youngster growing up in Alexandria, with a father who was a senior officer in the Egyptian Coastguard Service, Muhammad Abu Zaid was naturally a keen swimmer. He is seen standing on the left, probably with colleagues from the REAF, while on leave in Alexandria during the Second World War. (Abu Zaid family archive)

were operational. Its place at Almaza was taken by the REAF's newly established Technical Schools for Armaments and Wireless, the latter probably run by *Qa'id Sirb* (Flight Lieutenant) Hassan Tawfiq for a while before he was sent to Suez in 1941.

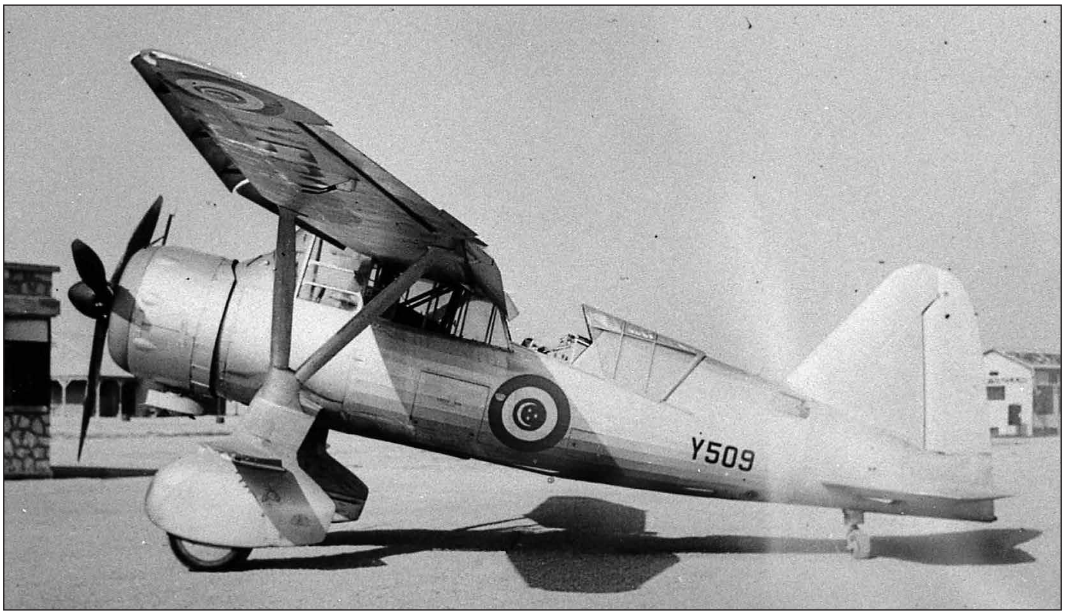
The year 1941 saw the REAF placed under increasing operational, technical and political strain, though it would also gain a new fighter squadron. While the war raged across the main theatre close to the Mediterranean coasts of western Egypt and eastern Libya, the vast desert regions south of the Qattara Depression remained the responsibility of the Egyptian Army, though occasionally being used by British specialist forces such as the Long Range Desert Group.

Italian bombing of Egyptian targets continued, and from early 1941 the *41st Gruppo* attacked Alexandria with Savoia-Marchetti SM.82 tri-motor bombers. Though they were better known as long-range transports, these large aeroplanes struck other targets in the Arab world including British-dominated Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. Italian CANT Z.1007 bombers were similarly sent against Egyptian targets from bases in the Aegean, especially naval bases and the Suez Canal. So were CANT Z.1007bis long-range reconnaissance aeroplanes of the *172nd Squadriglia*, which similarly operated from aerodromes in the Greek islands. During January and February, a number of ships were sunk by mines dropped by air into the Suez Canal. One result of these Italian successes was the urgent establishment of the REAF's Canal Barrage Balloon Command. It eventually employed around 50,000 Egyptian personnel and although it brought down no aircraft, it did make the enemy fly higher, thus making the accurate dropping of mines more difficult.

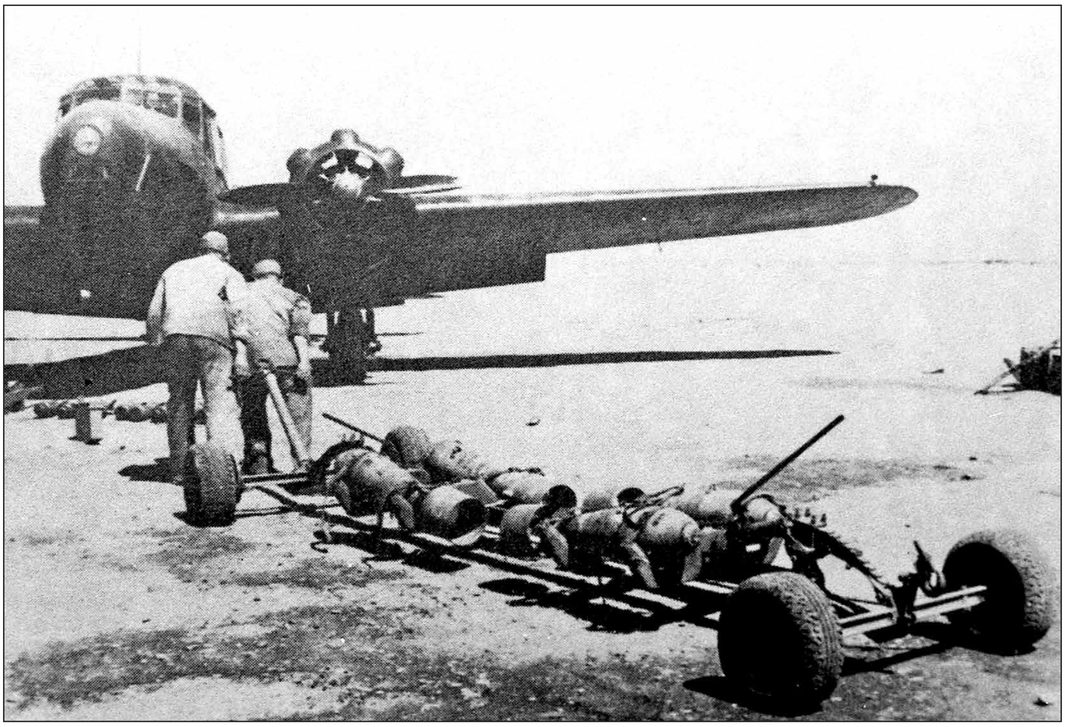
It is interesting to note that Egyptian faith in simple barrage balloon defences was such that they were still being used in the Ramadan War of October 1973. Other enemy bombers continued to target the vital Suez oil refinery. In fact, Muna Tawfiq recalled that, as a young girl, she was awakened by such night raids when she and her family lived on or near the Suez airbase where her father, *Qa'id Sirb* Hassan Tawfiq, now served.

The tide of war in the Western Desert swung decidedly in favour of the British during the early months of 1941 – though it would swing away from them later. The British seizure of the Eritrean and Somali coastline from Italy's East African Empire by mid-April also meant that the threat to shipping in the Red Sea and to a large extent in the Gulf of Suez from Italian submarines disappeared, so shipping protection patrols by REAF Lysanders were halted while those by Ansons were not restarted. No. 1 Squadron was nevertheless still committed to supporting the Egyptian Army Mobile Force in the Western Desert, despite sometimes having only one Lysander in flying condition.

Throughout this period the Gladiators of Nos. 2 and 5 Squadrons at Suez and Amaza were earning a good reputation amongst British colleagues at the Heliopolis Sector Headquarters for their scramble rate – though their now completely outclassed machines rarely



Westland Lysander Mk. I of No. 1 Squadron, REAF (serial number Y509) in the first year or two of the Second World War, when these machines still had their overall silver-aluminium dope colour scheme. (EAF Museum)



REAF groundcrew pulling a trolley loaded with bombs to one of No. 3 Squadron's Avro Ansons during the early part of the Second World War. These aircraft flew regular patrols down the southern part of the Gulf of Suez, searching for enemy submarines. Several unconfirmed sightings were made and some bombs were dropped. The Egyptians also lost two aircraft, the crew of one being killed while attempting an emergency landing in thick fog. (Author's collection)

got close enough to fire at enemy raiders. Occasionally their pilots' enthusiasm and frustration got the better of them, with one REAF Gladiator pilot, probably from No. 2 Squadron at Suez, reportedly firing all his ammunition at a British Hurricane from Ismailiya.

The REAF fighters, like those of the RAF defending the Egyptian heartland and Suez Canal, were now facing German as well as Italian bombers. The latter included a Luftwaffe Heinkel He 111 Staffel which specialised in dropping anti-shipping mines. Having arrived in Sicily in January 1941, but also having a forward airbase on the Italian-ruled Aegean island of Rhodes, this Luftwaffe unit posed a serious threat, especially to the Suez Canal and its maritime approaches. Nor were they alone. German reconnaissance aircraft discovered that a substantial Allied convoy was waiting off the coast south of Suez during the afternoon of 17 January, waiting to travel north up the Canal.

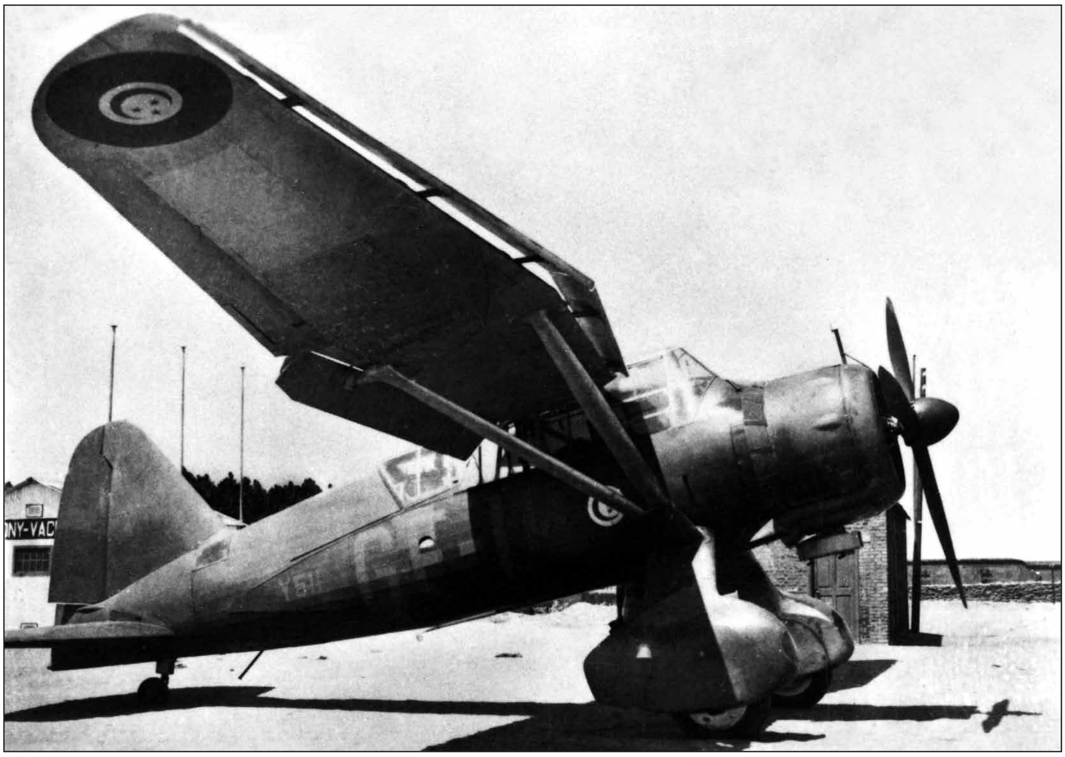
Eight He 111s from II./KG 26 therefore took off from Benghazi in Libya at half-hour intervals, intending to make a daring raid on the Suez Canal. This would be the first Luftwaffe bombing raid on Egyptian soil. It would also be at the very limits of the aircrafts' range. Four Heinkels were to search the right bank, four the left, flying in opposite directions and looking for targets. In the event, this daring attempt proved too ambitious, even when the aeroplanes flew at their most economical speeds and heights. No ships were seen and while the lead Heinkel carrying the mission leader turned around to repeat the search in a southerly direction, the other machines were sent towards secondary targets. The lead aeroplane again found nothing, and so aimed a few bombs at the Ismailiya ferry. Some ships were seen to be moored in the Great Bitter Lake, bombs being aimed at one of these, but missed. Thereafter the He 111s headed back to Libya, but met unexpectedly strong headwinds, with only one reaching Benghazi while the others all had to make emergency landings in the desert, most of their crews being captured.

Almost two weeks later German bombers attacked al-Shallufah, approaching from the south to confuse the defenders, and dropped an estimated 20 or so magnetic mines into the waterway. These aeroplanes are believed to have flown from Rhodes. The following night, 30–31 January 1941, a reported 11 He 111s of II./KG 26 from Rhodes carried out a further raid, dropping mines and bombs in the Canal area between Ismailiya and Suez. They then withdrew northwards over Port Said and Dumyat (Damietta). The threat posed by German magnetic mines led to three of the RAF's specialised degaussing Wellingtons being hurriedly sent to Ismailiya. Nevertheless, two ships were sunk.

No. 5 Squadron was back at Almaza in January 1941 and may have been resting as much as training. Abu Zaid's logbook shows that he made only three flights that month; one in a Gladiator on the 15th and two in a Magister primary trainer (serial number L231) on the 20th. Quite why this was considered necessary is unknown, but the first of these Magister jaunts was with the squadron commander, *Qa'id Sirb* Hassan Mahmud, while the second was solo.

Almaza had, of course, previously been shared between the FTS and other REAF units including No. 3 Squadron and the Royal Flight. No. 3 had reverted to being an Army Cooperation squadron but clearly did very little flying on its few serviceable machines. According to a privately published chronicle of the Shamsi family, and of the Sabri family to whom they were related by marriage (*Privileged for Three Centuries. The House of Chamsi Pasha,* by Samir W. Raafat), No. 3 Squadron pilot Husayn Zulfiqar Sabri had affairs of the heart to attend to at this time, in addition to his flying duties and political involvements:

> Hussein-Zulfiqar's next mission was tying the knot with his Port Said sweetheart Sisi Thabet. Together, they moved into a small apartment on Kafr al-Dawaar Street, not far from Almaza Airport in Heliopolis. In Ma'adi, [his parents] Baligh Bey and Dawlet Chamsi sighed with relief. Their rebellious flyboy had finally settled down. The parents' only lingering worry was whether or not he would seek combat action. WW2 was now in its second year [1941] and anti-British sentiment had reached new highs with the Dominion armies using Egypt as a stomping ground and, more recently, as a battlefield. In Ma'adi meanwhile, Baligh Sabry and the few other Egyptian residents, watched helplessly as 76,000 New Zealand soldiers set up camp on the suburb's eastern fringe.



By 1940 most Egyptian Lysanders had been repainted in a standard British-style camouflage scheme with a simplified version of REAF roundels on fuselage and wings. Because these aircraft were working so closely with the British, they were also given RAF individual codes. In this case Lysander number Y511 has the lettering GF-I or GF-L. (Peter Arnold Collection)

Despite its poor quality, this photograph of a five REAF Westland Lysanders the over Pyramids of Giza does show the camouflage pattern on the tops of their wings. (EAF Museum collection)

The problems facing No. 3 Squadron and the Royal Flight were not just about discontented aircrew; they were also technical. For example, Ibrahim Gazerine recalled how the two Percival Q.6s continued to give trouble. Their pilots considered that the aeroplanes' undercarriages were too high for proper visibility while taxying on the ground. The aeroplane also tended to stall with full flaps while engines overheated in the Egyptian climate. Gazerine was, however, able to solve the latter difficulty by adding more effective oil coolers, probably taken from unserviceable machines. No. 4 Squadron was now almost grounded and several of its pilots had already been attached to No. 3 Squadron to support the latter in its Red Sea patrols. Amongst them were Umar Shakib, Shafiq Hasib and Muhammad Adli Kafafi who, later in the Second World War, also flew Ansons between Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria.

February saw Hassan Tawfiq briefly return to Almaza from Suez for refresher flights to keep up his flying hours, including a jaunt in Hawker Hart K3154 on the 13th. One Flight of No. 1 Lysanders may still have been at Suez, no longer flying shipping protection patrols but perhaps assisting in the calibration of Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries. At least one Lysander was still supporting the Egyptian

Muhammad Adli Kafafi shading his yes, with some colleagues from No. 4 (Bomber) Squadron REAF on a desert exercise, probably late in 1940 or early 1941. (Kafafi family archive)

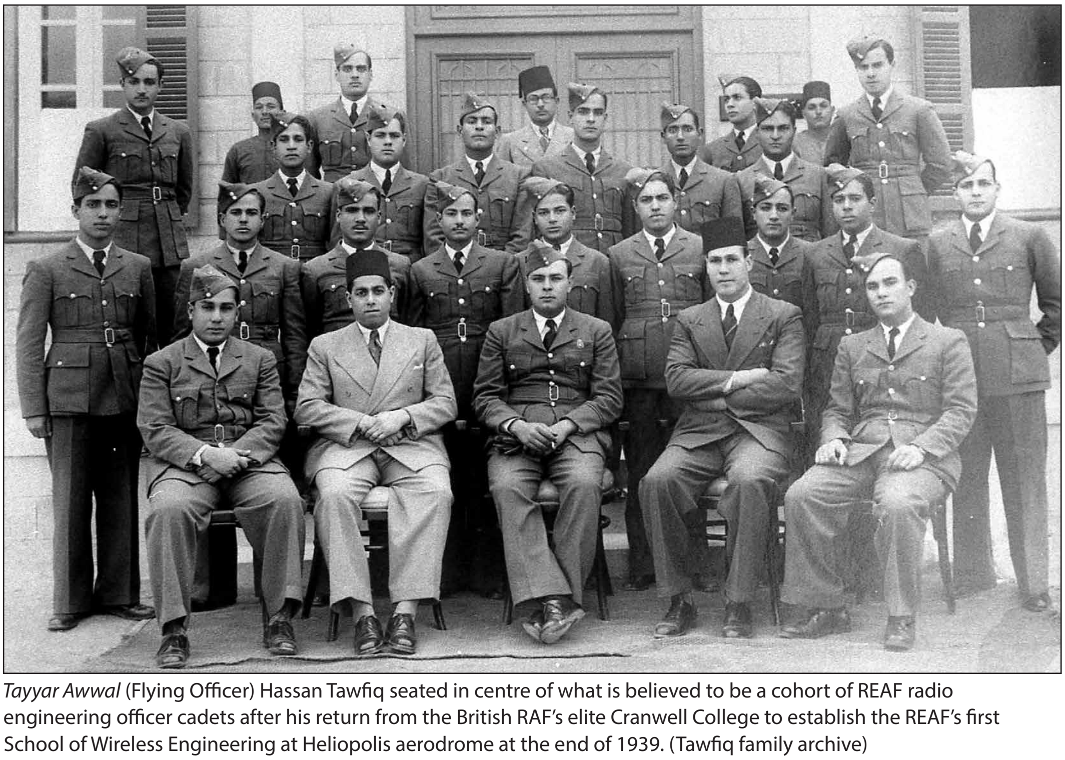
Army in the Western Desert, and it may have been around this time that *Fariq* (General) Ibrahim Attallah Pasha, the Egyptian Minister of War since August 1940, visited a REAF detachment 'in the middle of the Western desert' and was photographed with the men there. Theirs was a lonely war, but nowhere near as lonely and tedious as that of Egyptian soldiers who held isolated outposts for months on end with never a sight of the enemy.

Four or five German mine-laying He 111s were again over the Suez area on the night of 8–9 February, followed by others which dropped magnetic mines into the Canal before dawn on 22 February, causing major disruption to shipping in both directions. Other mining and bombing raids aimed at the area of Alexandria were probably carried out by Italian aeroplanes operating from the Greek islands. As yet there were still no attacks on Cairo and No. 5 Squadron at Almaza seems to have done little flying. Once again Abu Zaid's logbook lists only four flights, one in a Gladiator and three in Magisters, all solo.

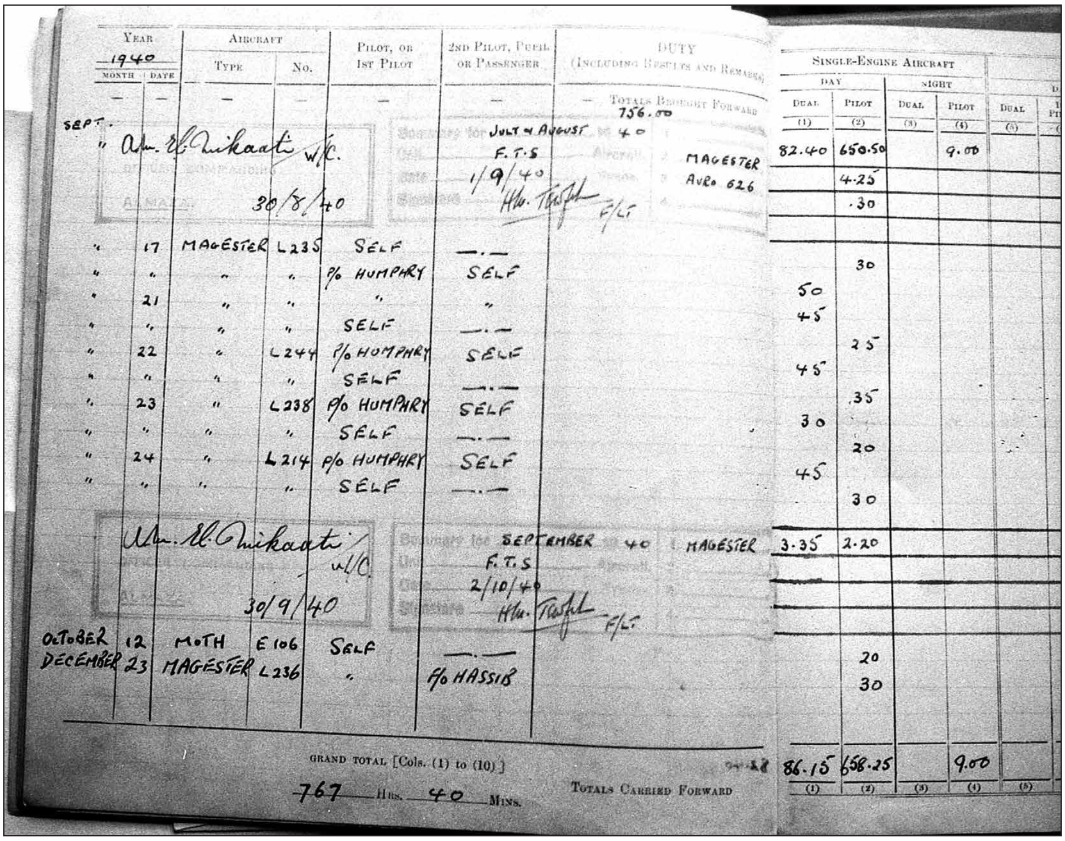
After the REAF's Flying Training School was transferred from Almaza to Khanka, the British Advisory Mission's senior officer informed Fred Weston that he would be leaving the FTS to become advisor to the Royal Flight. This seems to have necessitated Weston being promoted to Warrant Officer. The Royal Flight was still commanded by *Qa'id Asrab* (Squadron Leader) Ibrahim Hakki, though it is unclear whether he was now also in charge of No. 3 Squadron. Weston described Hakki as 'a very anti-British officer' who had succeeded in getting Weston's predecessor sent back to England under a cloud. Because most men in the RAF now regarded King Faruq as anti-British and pro-Italian, Fred Weston only agreed to this transfer if it was made clear that any resulting problems did not affect his RAF career.

On the next day, Weston went to the Royal Flight hangars where he found that the unit was very well organised. Furthermore, the Egyptian CO was highly intelligent, well trained and had experience with the RAF in England. His administrative offices were well-run, though Weston could only enter the CO's office through that of the Adjutant. Judging by the author's own experience of working for government-run organisations in the Arab Middle East, this was and remains standard practice, designed to save the boss from

Liwa Abd al-Wahab Pasha, the Director of the REAF, returning from a training flight in a Miles Magister in 1940. Abd al-Wahab was no longer a young man, and despite his best efforts, he never qualified as a pilot. (EAF Museum collection)



Tayyar Awwal (Flying Officer) Hassan Tawfiq seated in centre of what is believed to be a cohort of REAF radio engineering officer cadets after his return from the British RAF's elite Cranwell College to establish the REAF's first School of Wireless Engineering at Heliopolis aerodrome at the end of 1939. (Tawfiq family archive)



Year 1940 Month	Date	Aircraft Type	Aircraft No.	Pilot, or 1st Pilot	2nd Pilot, Pupil or Passenger	Duty (Including Results and Remarks)	Single-Engine Aircraft Day Dual (1)	Day Pilot (2)	Night Dual (3)	Night Pilot (4)	Dual (5)
—	—	—	—	—	—	— Totals Brought Forward 756.00	82.40	650.50		9.00	
Sept.											
"	17	MAGESTER	L235	SELF	—.—			30			
"	"	"	"	P/O HUMPHRY	SELF		50				
"	21	"	"	"	"		45				
"	"	"	"	SELF	—.—			25			
"	22	"	L244	P/O HUMPHRY	SELF		45				
"	"	"	"	SELF	—.—			.35			
"	23	"	L238	P/O HUMPHRY	SELF		30				
"	"	"	"	SELF	—.—			20			
"	24	"	L214	P/O HUMPHRY	SELF		45				
"	"	"	"	SELF	—.—			30			
OCTOBER	12	MOTH	E106	SELF	—.—			20			
DECEMBER	23	MAGESTER	L236	"	P/O HASSIB			30			

A.M. El Mikaati W/C.
ALMAZA
30/8/40

Summary for JULY & AUGUST 40
Unit F.T.S
Date 1/9/40
Signature H.M. Tewfik F/Lt
1. MAGESTER
2. AVRO 626
4.25
.30

A.M. El Mikaati W/C
30/9/40

Summary for SEPTEMBER 40
Unit F.T.S
Date 2/10/40
Signature H.M. Tewfik F/Lt
1. MAGESTER 3.35 2.20

GRAND TOTAL [Cols. (1) to (10)]
767 Hrs. 40 Mins.

TOTALS CARRIED FORWARD 86.15 658.25 9.00

A page from Hassan Tawfiq's pilot's logbook for 17 September to 23 December 1940, signed off by A.M. El Mikaati (Muhammad Abd al-Muna'im al-Miqaati) and H.M. Tewfik (Tawfiq) himself. (Mona Tewfik collection)

King Faruq of Egypt, accompanied by senior officers and members of his entourage, inspecting a Vickers machine gun mounted on a car, probably during the early years of the Second World War. Such a vehicle seems, however, to have been used by the Egyptian Police rather than by the Egyptian Army. (Albert Grandolini collection)

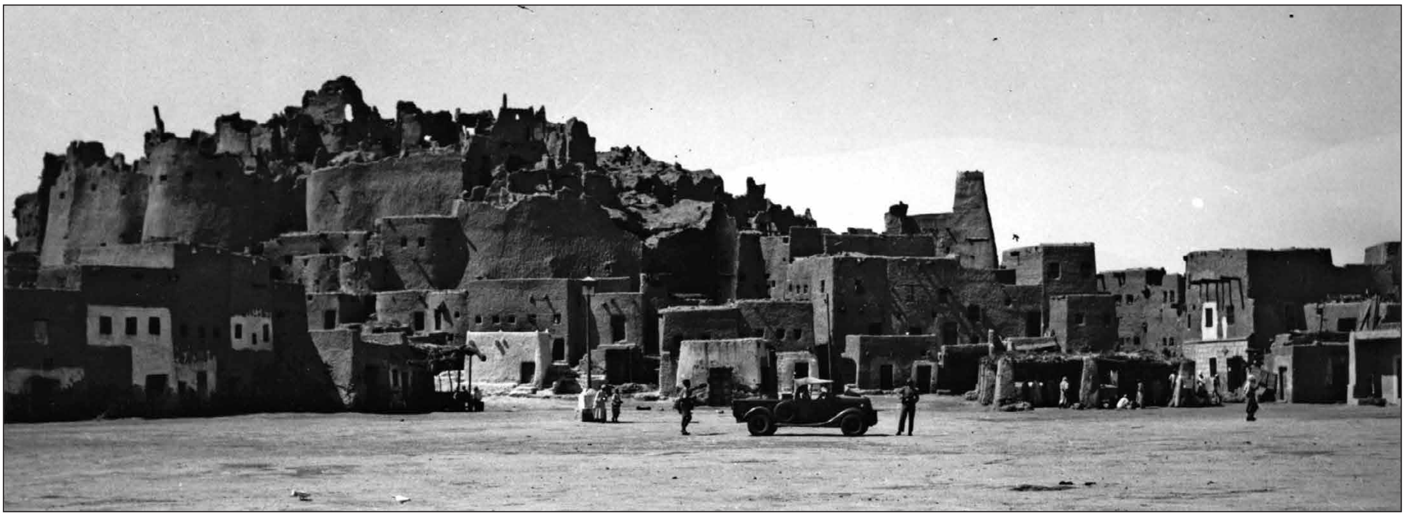
being bothered by too many 'petitioners'. Unfortunately, Fred Weston found that the REAF Royal Flight had not been officially informed about its new advisor, who could not therefore be officially recognised though he was allowed to use his predecessor's office. When Weston complained to the British Advisory Mission about this, he was told that the Egyptians were actually correct, though perhaps being unnecessarily punctilious.

The Blitz on Egypt, as the respected aviation historian Christopher Shores has called it, was increasing in intensity. Yet Axis raids remained more selective in their targeting than was seen in any other theatre during the Second World War. The REAF's air defence responsibilities remained confined to the Cairo area and the southern half of the Suez Canal, and in both cases only by day until the Egyptians' handful of Hurricanes could reach operational status.

Little is known about these seven Hurricanes, except that they were Mk. I (Tropical) versions and had all been refurbished – in some cases probably also repaired – ex-RAF machines. The known serial numbers (Z4387 and Z4701) were machines built by the Gloster Aircraft Company and powered by a Rolls Royce Merlin III or XX engine. Z4800 was also mentioned though this must be an error because Flight Sergeant Hargeaves of No. 274 Squadron RAF was shot down in this aircraft by the Luftwaffe 'ace' Hans-Joachim Marseille on 8 February 1942, making a belly landing in enemy territory and being taken prisoner.

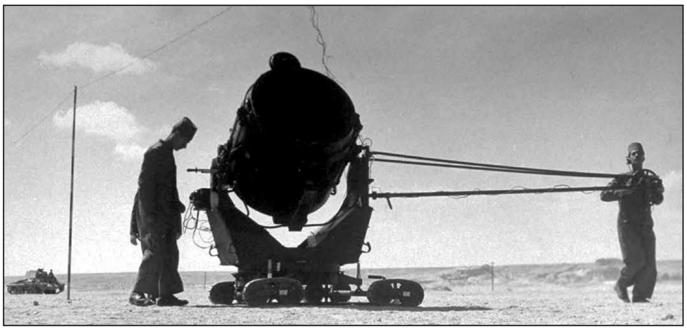
The first major Axis raid of March 1941 came on the night of 10–11 when four enemy aeroplanes dropped bombs rather than mines on targets along the Suez Canal and along the Mediterranean coast of Sinai as far as al-Arish. Seven RAF Hurricanes were scrambled from Ismailiya but were unable to intercept these raiders. The following day five mines were dropped into the Canal but three exploded prematurely. The REAF's Gladiators at Suez continued to fly but were too slow to intercept the foe's much faster and more modern bombers. The only confirmed exception to this frustrating state of affairs was on 28 March when a Gladiator of No. 2 Squadron, having achieved the advantage of height and thus diving at speed, got close enough to a German Heinkel He 111 to open fire, but the pilot's guns then jammed. Sadly, the man's name has not been made public, though he should surely feature in REAF history.

No. 5 Squadron was still at Almaza in March and again Abu Zaid made only five flights, all solos in Magisters. Most of these machines would presumably have gone to Khanka with the FTS but some clearly remained. Early in April, the REAF's Nos. 2 and 5 Squadrons also swapped places at Almaza and Suez. The mixed bag of aeroplanes operated by No. 3 Squadron at Almaza continued to cause problems for the maintenance staff. Having solved a technical difficulty with the Q.6s, Ibrahim Gazerine was ordered to do what

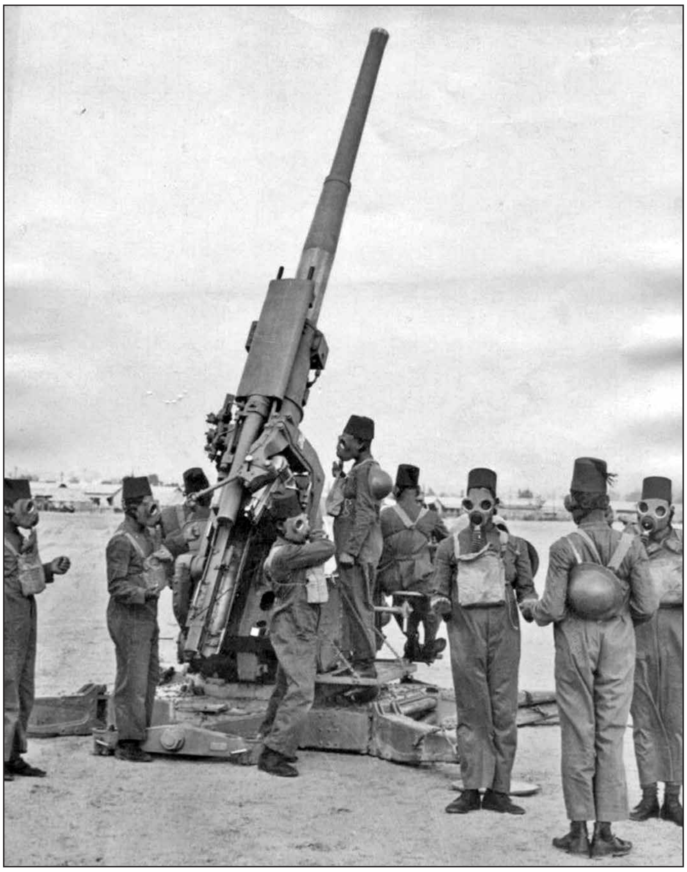


The main settlement in Siwa Oasis was also named Siwa and was renowned for its medieval fortifications. Having been defending by the Egyptian Army during the first years of the Second World War, the British insisted on taking over the defence of Siwa, then abandoned it to the enemy without a shot fired. This caused deep anger amongst the Egyptian military, including the REAF. (Egyptian Geographical Society)

King Faruq of Egypt in REAF uniform, probably around the time of the outbreak of the Second World War. (Author's collection)



Egyptian Army anti-aircraft troops training in the use of a 90cm searchlight, with a Cruiser tank in the background, 1940. (Albert Grandolini collection)



The limited capabilities of Egypt's armed forces was, perhaps unintentionally, highlighted in this publicity photograph of Egyptian anti-aircraft gunners training in 1939, without even dummy ammunition. (Author's collection)

he could to make the Avro 641 Commodore, at one time Tait's own machine, operational. Its engine could no longer be used because of a lack of spare parts, so Gazerine replaced the original 215hp Armstrong Siddeley Lynx IVC seven-cylinder radial engine with a more powerful 350hp seven-cylinder Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah IX of similar weight but slightly larger dimensions. This he took from a damaged or unserviceable Avro Anson Mk. I because the engine mountings were similar. Nevertheless, the cowling had to be reshaped by REAF technicians to provide sufficient room for the Cheetah's cylinder-heads. This was also before this Commodore, or perhaps a second Commodore's silver dope was replaced by a camouflage finish.

Despite General Aziz al-Masri's enforced retirement as the Egyptian Chief of Staff, this patriotic but troublesome ex-Ottoman officer continued to wield influence within the Egyptian officer corps. Perhaps his most daring supporter within the Egyptian Army at this time was Anwar Sadat, while in the REAF it was probably Abd al-Latif Baghdadi. German secret agents were now active in Egypt, as Italian agents had been for almost a year. They apparently made contact with General Aziz al-Masri and his followers in

Egyptian Army anti-aircraft troops training with a listening device, 1940. (Albert Grandolini collection)

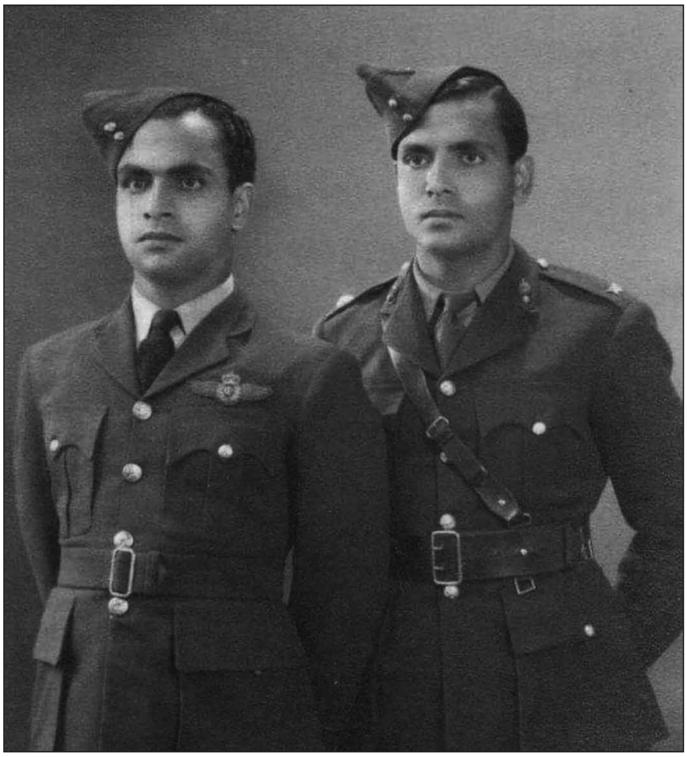
March 1941, though quite what al-Masri intended to do as a result remains unclear.

4

NEUTRALS, SUBJECT PEOPLES AND THE WAR IN THE AIR

The Kingdoms of Egypt and Iraq were theoretically independent and, until the final months of the conflict, neutral. Other Arab peoples were either genuinely independent and neutral like Saudi Arabia and Yemen, or were the colonial subjects of a belligerent power – Britain, France or Italy – or of Spain which also remained neutral. Yet others were inhabitants of a protected state such as the Gulf Emirates and Sultanate of Oman (under British protection) or Morocco (under French protection). Syria and Lebanon were in a different position again, having been allowed some degree of independence by France before the outbreak of war. Elsewhere the rivalries and divisions which sometimes amounted to feuds between Arab states, and which typified their pre-war relations, continued throughout the war years. Nor would they end with the establishment of the Arab League in 1945.

Of the genuinely independent, neutral Arab states, only Saudi Arabia had any sort of operational air force. Although the Second World War effectively halted further development of the Saudi Arabian Air Force, it continued to exist in theory. Otherwise, the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 had little impact upon Saudi Arabia, apart from interrupting trade and making the seas around its coasts more dangerous. The conflict initially had even less effect on the country's air force, though a new Commanding Officer, Abdullah Mandili, was appointed in November. He had been trained in Italy and was now regarded as the best pilot in the Saudi Air Force.

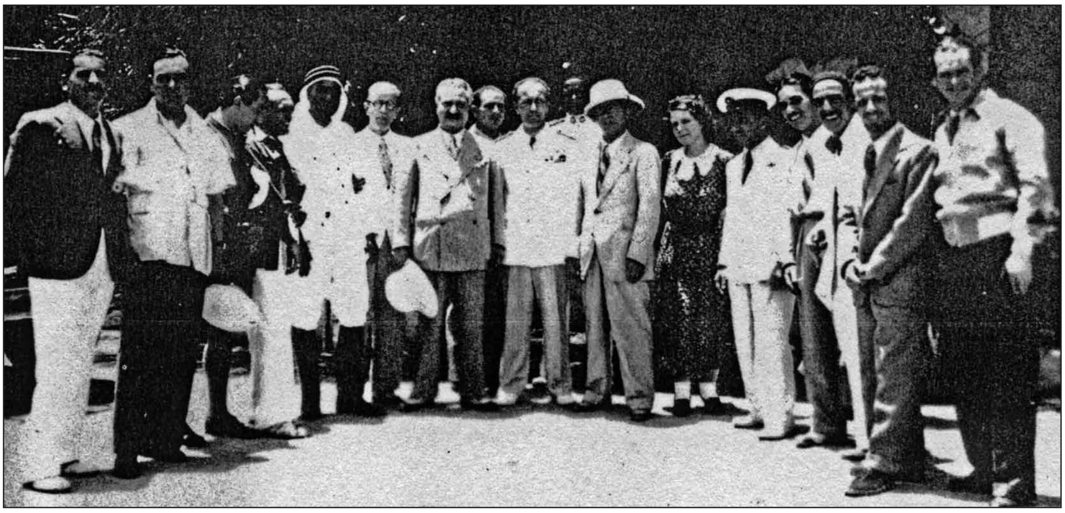


Isma'il Adli al-Shafa'i (left) and his brother Sharif Adli al-Shafa'i photographed in 1939 when they joined the REAF and the Egyptian Army respectively. (Al-Shafa'i family archive)

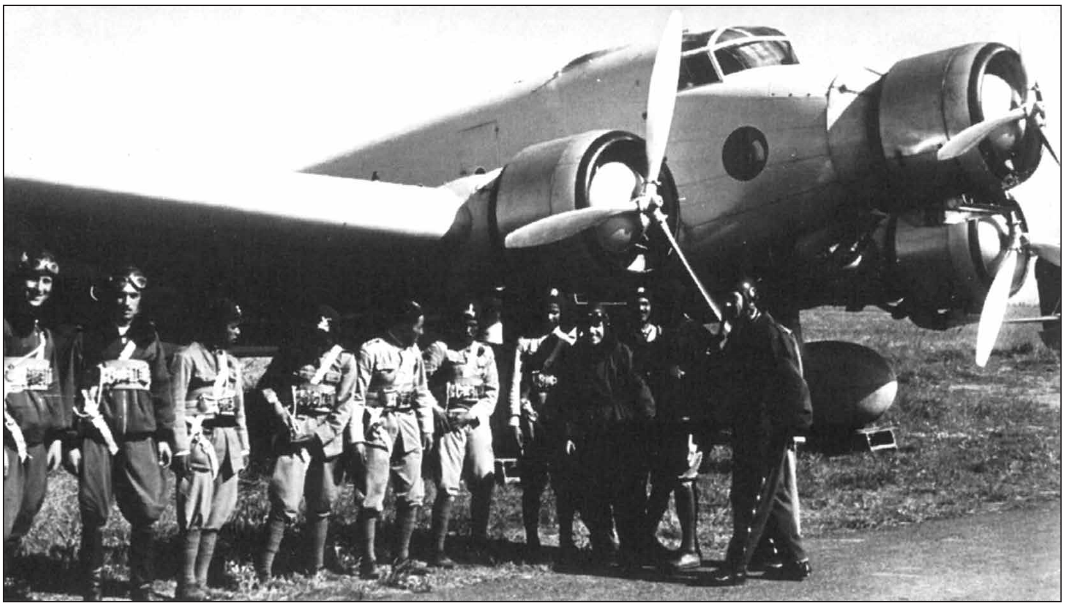
The White Russian refugee Nikolai Naidenov, and his Russian mechanics, Maximov and a second unnamed man, were supported by some Saudi ground crew. Yet it was the Russians who kept a small number of aeroplanes airworthy. These were occasionally taken up for short flights around Jiddah and sometimes to Taif. In practice, however, few Saudi aircraft are known to have flown during this period. They included two of the Saudi Air Force's Caproni Ca.100 trainers, which were still airworthy in early 1940. Unfortunately, one of them was damaged on 3 March 1940 while the other was written off in a crash on 1 May the same year. On the other hand, records show that a Saudi Arabian Caudron flew to Cairo in the latter part of May 1940. It was probably the Caudron Simoun that had been given to the Saudi government by the French government in 1938 rather than the Caudron C.510 Pelican which the Saudis acquired back in 1935.

As the aviation historian and specialist on the Saudi Air Force, Lennart Andersson pointed out, the Arabian Peninsula and the seas which surround it on three sides were of huge strategic importance during the Second World War. These waters served as gateways to the east for the British, especially the Red Sea with the southern entrance to the vital Suez Canal at one end and the port of Aden at the other. Similarly, the Persian Gulf led to and from the oilfields of Persia (Iran), Iraq and Kuwait. Furthermore, British-dominated Egypt and Sudan, British Somaliland and the Italian East African Empire of Eritrea, Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Somalia lay on one side of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, with British-held Aden and the Aden protectorate on the other. It was almost inevitable for the region to become an arena of conflict sooner or later.

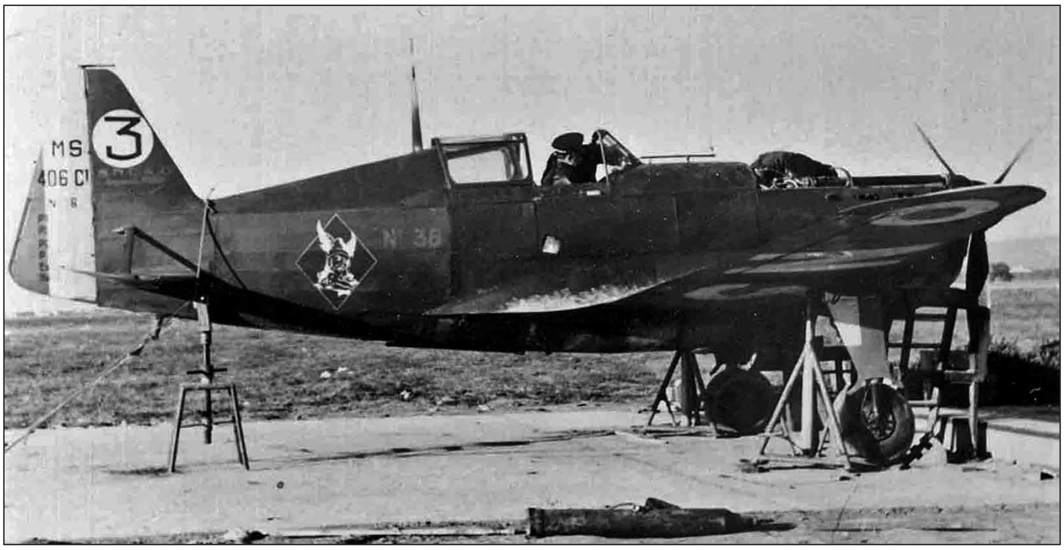
For Saudi Arabia and Yemen, staying out of the great international quarrel was a priority. After Italy entered the war in June 1940, Aden became a launch-pad for RAF attacks against Italian East Africa. On the other side, British-protected Bahrain was bombed by four Italian Savoia SM.82 long-range bombers on 19 October 1940. This



Italian officials, technical and aircrew in Saudi Arabia. This photograph may have been taken when two Caproni Ca. 101bis transport aircraft were delivered to Saudi Arabia before the Second World War. (Albert Grandolini collection)



Savoia-Marchetti SM.81 of the *Regia Aeronautica*'s *15th Stormo*, based at Castel Benito in 1939. The five men in lighter uniforms in the centre are believed to be members of the Libyan *Ascari del Cielo*. (Italian Air force Museum, Vigna di Valle)



One of the Morane 406 fighters number 38 of SPA 96 of GC I/6 at the gun-testing range at al-Blidah (Blida) aerodrome in Algeria in 1939. Note the unit badge consisting of a Gaulish warrior's head wearing a helmet with feathered wings attached. (Alain Barria via Pierre Jarrige)

was an astonishingly daring attack and came as a shock in an area which had previously been thought secure. It also resulted in a diversion of scarce RAF resources. Unfortunately, Italian bombers also accidently hit Dahran on the neighbouring coast of neutral Saudi Arabia, though without doing much damage. Unintended as this violation of Saudi territory was, it clearly did nothing to increase Italian prestige and popularity within Saudi Arabia; not even in a Saudi Air Force which had previously enjoyed close relations with its Italian opposite numbers.

Like Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of Yemen declared its neutrality despite having recently renewed its treaty with Italy. This did not stop the British fearing continued Italian influence and propaganda within an independent state on the northern frontier of the British-ruled or British-dominated Aden Protectorate. It is also reasonable to assume that the King-Imam of Yemen had more than passing sympathy for the Axis powers as their victory would probably have resulted in the British being expelled from Aden. Meanwhile, cultural and some limited political contacts between Yemen and Egypt remained another potential source of concern for Britain.

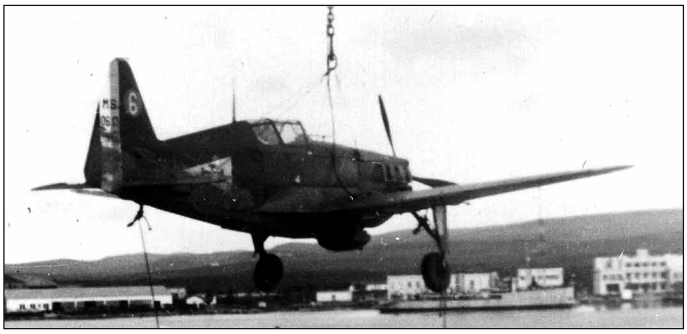
A relatively small French colonial territory on the other side of the Gulf of Aden did not, and still does not, strictly form part of the Arab world. This was Djibouti, or as it was then known, French Somaliland. Its affairs were closely bound up with its Arab and African neighbours, especially those of British-ruled Aden. French forces based in this small territory, squeezed between Italian East Africa and British Somaliland, cooperated with, and were mutually supported by, British forces in Somaliland and the Aden Protectorate until the armistice of 24 June 1940

Farman 222 of the *2nd Escadrille* of GB I/15 at al-Blidah (Blida) in Algeria in 1939, though normally based at Avord in France. (André Molto via Jarrige)

The officers' mess of *Escadrille Saharienne ES 591* which was established at Warqlah (Ouargla) and equipped with Potez 25 on 1 March 1939 to face any potential Italian threat from neighbouring Libya. The Escadrille badge consisting of a silver *croix du sud* with the sign of Tanit, the Carthaginian war goddess, in the centre, has been painted on the front of the bar. (Emile Cimino via Pierre Jarrige)

TRÈS SECRET
CASA

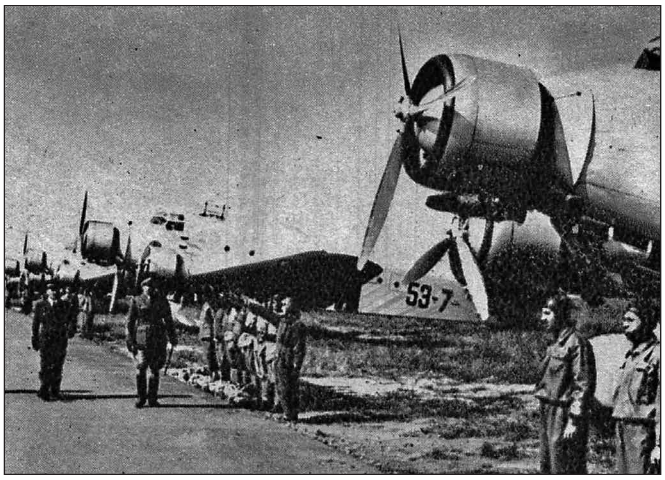
A Top Secret aerial photograph of Casablanca aerodrome taken late in March 1940. Its sensitivity stemmed from the fact that recently very supplied American Glenn Martin 167F and other American training aircraft are clearly visible. (Musée de l'Air, Paris)



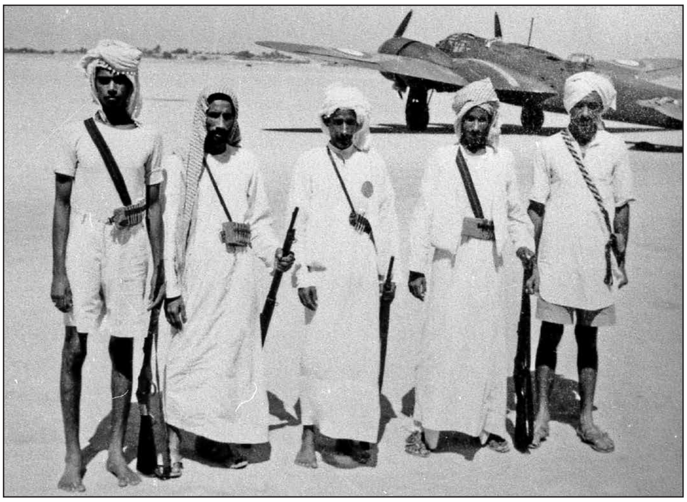
A Morane Saulnier MS 406 fighter of the *Armeé de l'Air* unit GC 1/17 being brought ashore from a French naval transport ship at Bizerte in Tunisia shortly before the Second World War. (J. Muton photograph via P. Jarrige)

took France out of the war. By then, of course, Italy had joined the conflict. During the brief period between these two events, when France and Italy were at war, a half-squadron of Potez 25 TOE reconnaissance biplanes in Djibouti formed part of 39th *Regiment d'Aviation d'Observation* (RAO), the rest of which was in Syria and Lebanon. This handful of men and aeroplanes carried out reconnaissance missions over Italian-ruled Abyssinia and bombed the Italian outpost at Dewele. On the other side, the *Regia Aeronautica* bombarded Djibouti from 21 to 23 June 1940, while two Savoia-Marchetti SM.79 bombers from the *7th Squadriglia* also attacked the French aerodrome.

Bloch 210 of the French *Armée de l'Air* at Blida in Algeria in 1939. The Bloch 210 was outdated by the start of the Second World War and the machines seen here might have been from the *19th Escadrille* of GB I/19 and GB II/19 which had been sent to North Africa to be re-equipped with Douglas DB-7 bombers. (André Molto via Pierre Jarrige)



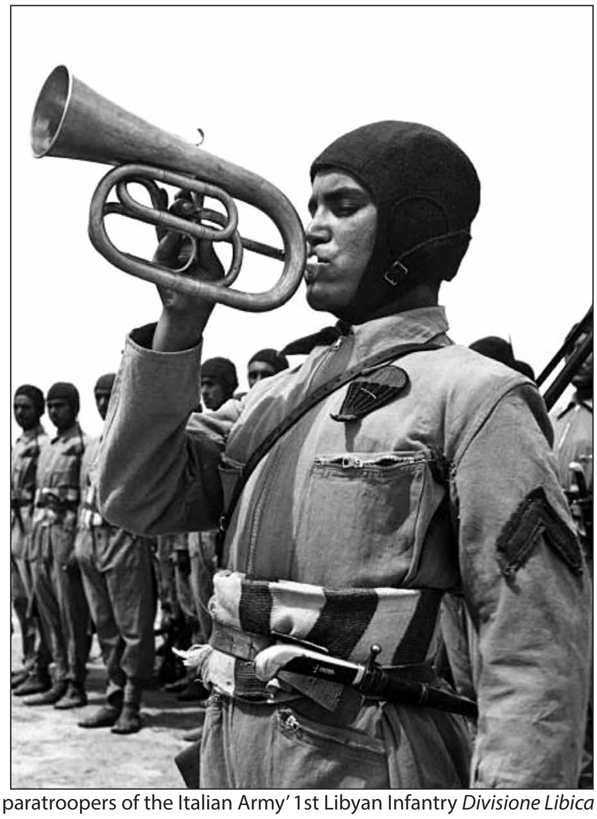
Savoia-Marchetti SM.81s of the *Regia Aeronautica*'s *53rd Squadriglia* in Libya, being used as paratroop transports. The parachutists lined up for inspection are in fact Libyan *Ascari del Cielo* volunteers. In September 1940 the *Ascari del Cielo* were amongst those who forced back British troops close to the Egyptian frontier when they formed part of the *Gruppo Maletti* at Sidi Barrani. However, they did not make any parachute drops. (Italian Air Force archive)



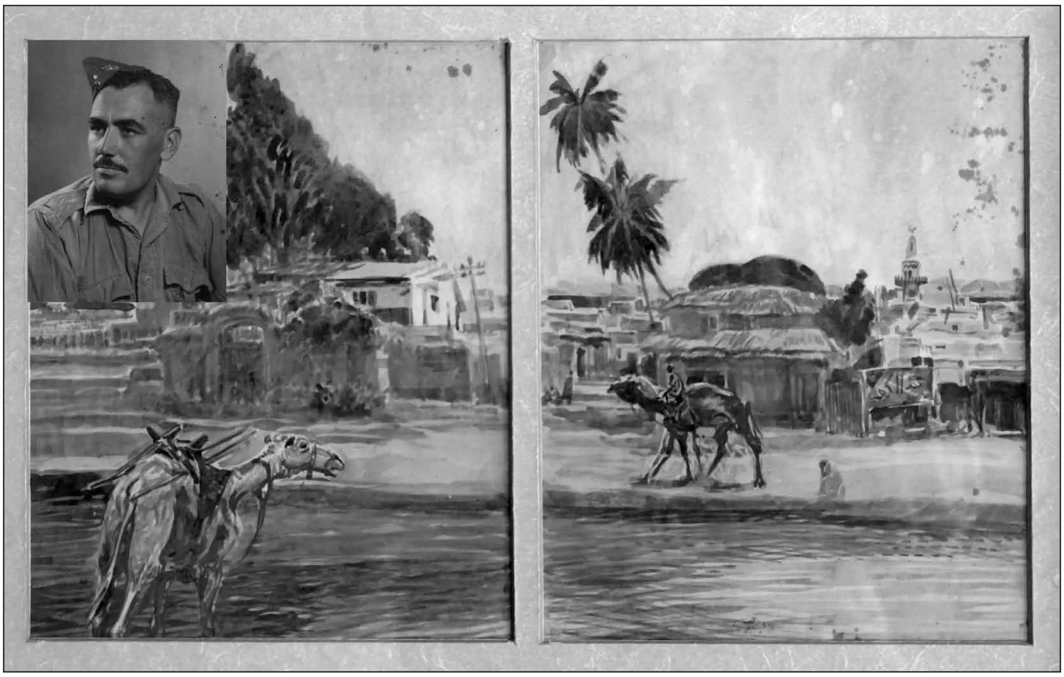
A Bristol Blenheim photographed in 1940 with local guards, probably at RAF Aden or RAF Sharjah. This aeroplane was probably part of No. 211 Squadron RAF which exchanged its antiquated Hawker Hinds for Blenheim Mk. I light bombers at Ismailiya in Egypt in January 1939. (John Woodroffe photograph)

And what was the fate of the Libyan *Acari del Cielo* during the North African campaign? Brigadier General Armando Pescatori, one of Italy's most experienced colonial officers who is said to have served longer in Africa than any other, took command of Italian Army's Libyan troops on 1 March 1940. Thereafter, the 2nd Libyan Division was known as the *Divisione Libica Pescatori*. This new force, with a total of 7,224 men, was composed of two groups of Libyan infantry, the 3rd and 4th, each consisting of three battalions, plus five batteries of Libyan artillery, a company of anti-tank guns, a battalion of engineers and various divisional services. Though the majority of the soldiers were locally recruited Libyan ascaris, their officers and specialist soldiers were from Italy. During the summer of 1940 the Libyan *Ascari del Cielo* were given the nickname of *Diavoli neri,* or 'Black devils' and now officially numbered 500 men.

The division of which they formed an elite part was still commanded by Pescatori during the Italian invasion of Egypt. Thus, the *Ascari del Cielo* were amongst those who attacked and forced back British troops close to the Egyptian frontier between 9 and 16 September 1940, when they formed part of the *Gruppo Maletti* at Sidi Barrani. However, the *Ascari del Cielo* did not make any parachute drops. The unit was then virtually destroyed during



The paratroopers of the Italian Army' 1st Libyan Infantry *Divisione Libica Pescatori* still had Italian officers and still appear to have relied on traditional bugle calls to help them reassemble after a drop. During the summer of 1940 these men earned the nickname of *Diavoli neri* "Black devils", by which time they numbered around 500 men. (Albert Grandolini collection)



Amongst the unpleasant tasks allotted to the British Royal Army Service Corps was that of scraping the remains of airmen out of downed aircraft when the latter were recovered from a crash site. Many RASC men drowned their disgust in drink, but Private Jack Nicolle had his art to fall back upon. One result was this watercolour of a village close to Ismailiyah aerodrome, painted on an exercise book around 1941. (Author's collection)

Operation Compass, the British counter-offensive; Brigadier General Armando Pescatori, CO of the 2nd Libyan Division, was captured on 10 December 1940.

In January 1941 the remnants of the *Ascari del Cielo* were renamed the *Gruppo Mobile Tonini* and during the early part of that month the battalion was moved to Darnah where it absorbed what remained of the *Gruppo Pancano*. The Libyan Battalion still amounted to some 430 men, to which were added a further 50 from the Parachute School. Eventually the *Gruppo Mobile Tonini* had around 850 men plus artillery and machine guns. However, in December 1942, the remaining *Ascari del Cielo* were captured during General Montgomery's advance into Libya following the battle of al-Alamein. Whether any escaped across the Mediterranean with the German and Italian armies is unknown, but a number of Libyans, along with some Tunisians, were recruited into a predominantly Moroccan unit of North African troops, 80 of whom were trained as paratroopers by the German Army in Greece in June 1943. This little-known group are understood to have been intended for sabotage work in North Africa, though they never seem to have been sent there.

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